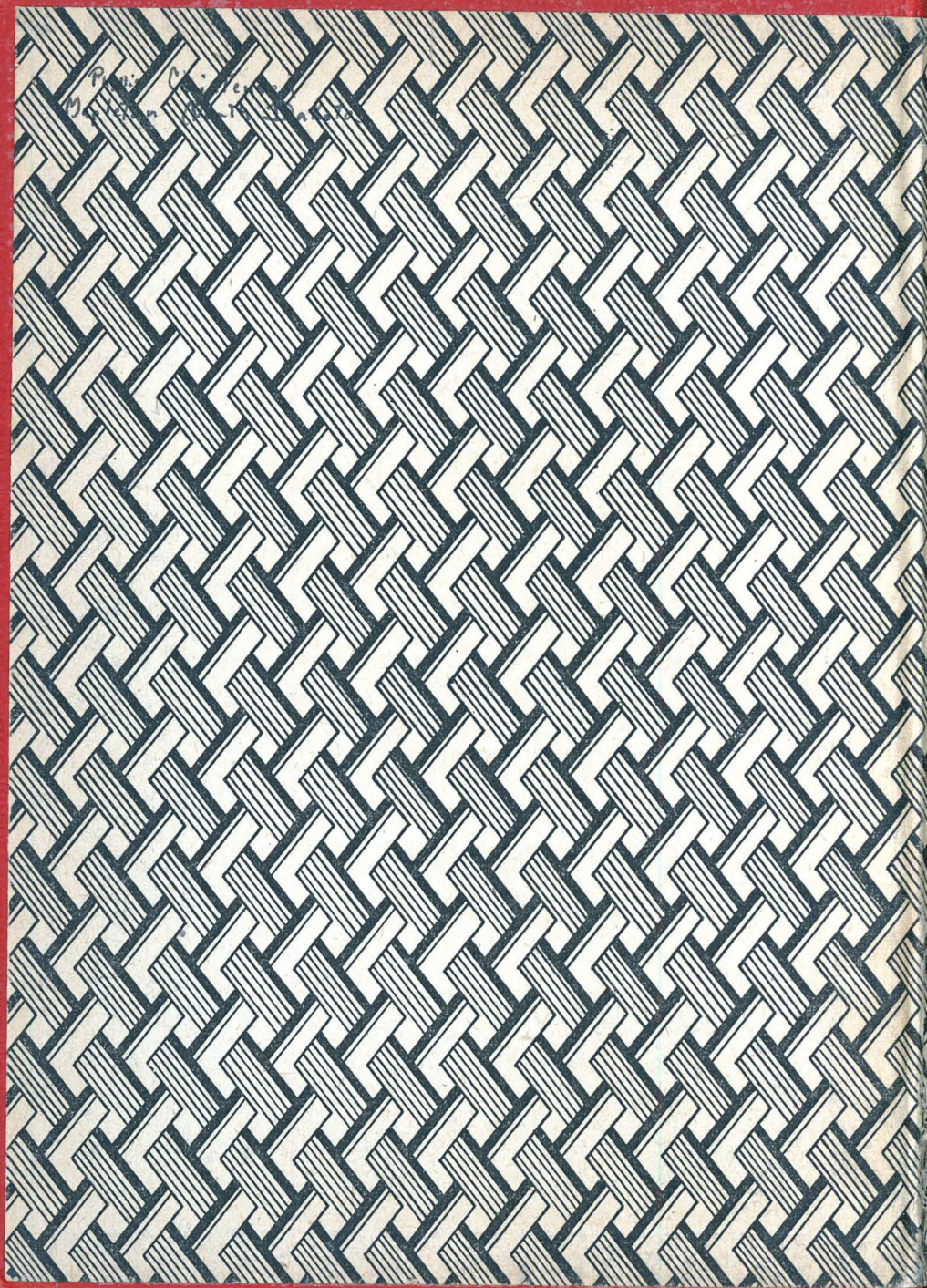
SIGNAL *in the* DARK

MILDRED A. WIRT



This is my book

Phyllis Ann

from

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Christmas '46

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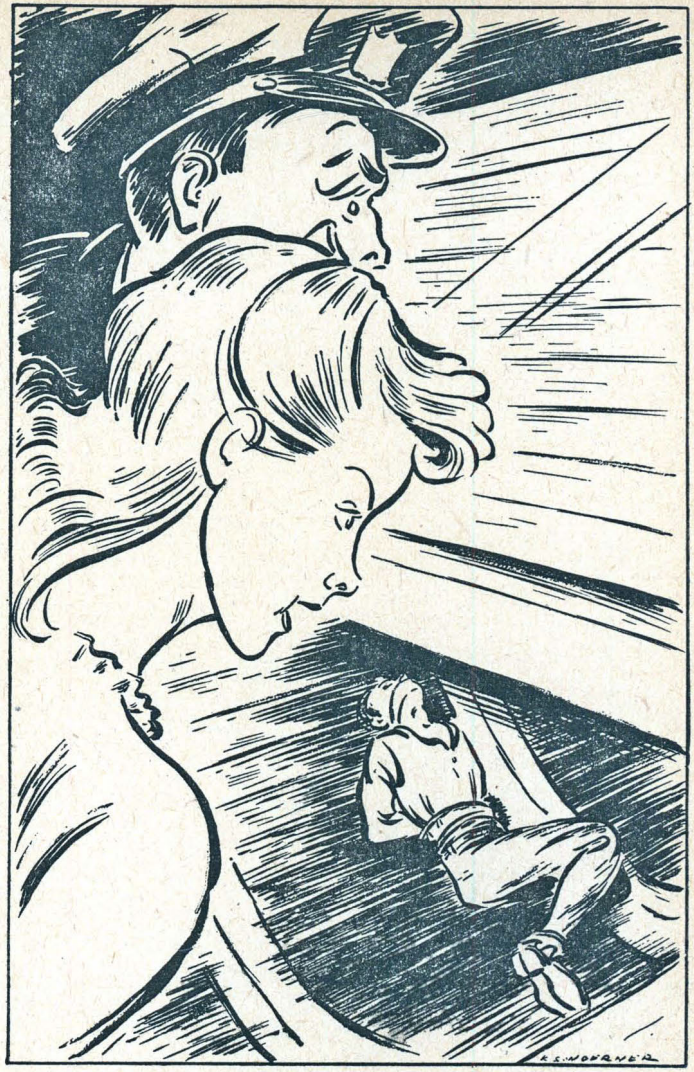

PENNY UTTERED A LITTLE CRY

"Signal in the Dark"

(See Page 195)

Signal in the Dark

By

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MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

Illustrated

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PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL
THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT
DANGER AT THE DRAWBRIDGE
BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR
CLUE OF THE SILKEN LADDER
THE SECRET PACT
THE CLOCK STRIKES THIRTEEN
THE WISHING WELL
SABOTEURS ON THE RIVER
GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE
VOICE FROM THE CAVE
GUILT OF THE BRASS THIEVES
SIGNAL IN THE DARK

Other Titles in Preparation

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Signal in the Dark

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CHAPTER

1

HELP WANTED

"THE SITUATION is getting worse instead of better, Penny. Three of our reporters are sick, and we're trying to run the paper with only a third of our normal editorial staff." Anthony Parker, publisher of the *Riverview Star*, whirled around in the swivel chair to face his daughter who sat opposite him in the private office of the newspaper. "Frankly, I'm up against it," he added gloomily.

Penny, a slim girl with deep, intelligent blue eyes, uncurled herself from the window ledge. Carefully, she dusted her brown wool skirt which had picked up a cobweb and streaks of dirt.

"You could use a janitor around here too," she hinted teasingly. "How about hiring me?"

"As queen of the dustmop brigade?"

"As a reporter," Penny corrected. "I'm serious, Dad. You're desperate for employes. I'm desperate for spending money. I have three weeks school vacation coming up, so why not strike a bargain?"

"The paper needs experienced workers, Penny."

"Precisely."

"You're a very good writer," Mr. Parker admitted. "In fact, in months past you turned in some of the best feature stories the *Star* ever printed. But always they were special assignments. We must have a reporter who can work a daily, eight-hour grind and be depended upon to handle routine stories with speed, accuracy and efficiency."

"And you think I am not what the doctor ordered?"

"I think," corrected Mr. Parker, "that you would blow your pretty little top by the end of the second day. For instance, it's not easy nor pleasant to write obituaries. Yet it must be done, and accurately. On this paper, a new reporter is expected to do rewrites and other tedious work. You wouldn't like it, Penny."

"I'd take it neatly in my stride, Dad. Why not try me and see?"

Mr. Parker shook his head and began to read the three-star edition of the paper, its ink still damp from the press.

"Give me one sound, logical reason for turning me down," Penny persisted.

"Very well. You are my daughter. Our editors might feel that they were compelled to treat you with special consideration—give you the best assignments—handle you with kid gloves."

"You could take care of that matter easily enough."

"If they took my instructions seriously, you might not like it," the newspaper owner warned. "A reporter learns hard and bitter lessons. Mr. DeWitt, for instance, is a fine editor—our best, but he has a temper and—"

The frosted glass door swung open and an elderly, slightly bald man in shirt sleeves slouched in. Seeing Penny, he would have retreated, had not Mr. Parker called him back.

"What's on your mind, DeWitt?"

"Trouble," growled the editor. "That no-good, addle-brained boy we hired as night police reporter, just blew up! Said it was too confining to sit in a police station all night waiting for something to happen! So he gets himself a job in a canning factory! Now we're another employee short."

"Dad, let me take over the night police job!" Penny pleaded.

Both her father and Mr. DeWitt smiled as if suffering from intense pain. "Penny," Mr. Parker explained gently. "Night police work isn't suitable for a girl. Furthermore, it is one of the most undesirable jobs on a paper."

"But I want to work somewhere, and you're so stubborn!"

Mr. DeWitt studied Penny with concentrated interest. Hope flickered in his eyes. Turning abruptly to

Mr. Parker he asked: "Why not, Chief? We could use her on the desk for rewrite. We're mighty hard up, and that's a fact."

"What about the personnel problem?" Mr. Parker frowned. "How would the staff take it?"

"Some of the reporters might not like it," Mr. DeWitt admitted, "but who's running this paper anyhow?"

"I often wonder," sighed Mr. Parker.

Detecting signs of a weakening, Penny appealed to Mr. DeWitt. "Wouldn't I be a help to you if I were on the staff?" she urged.

"Why, sure," he agreed cautiously.

"There, you see, Dad! Mr. DeWitt wants me!"

"Penny, it's a personnel problem," her father explained with growing impatience. "The other reporters might not consider you a welcome addition to the staff. You would expect favors."

"I never would!"

"We need her," said Mr. DeWitt significantly. "We really do."

With two against him, Mr. Parker suddenly gave in.

"All right," he agreed. "Penny, we'll put you on as a cub reporter. That means you'll start as a beginner with a beginner's salary and do routine work until you've proved your merit. You'll expect no special consideration. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly!" Grinning from ear to ear, Penny would have agreed to anything.

"Furthermore, if the work gets you down, I won't have you coming to me asking for a change."

"I'll never darken your office door, Dad. Just one question. How much money does a beginner get?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

Penny's face was a blank.

"It will be more than you are worth the first few weeks," Mr. Parker said.

"I'll take it," Penny declared hastily. "When do I start?"

"Right now," decided her father. "DeWitt, introduce her to the staff, and put her to work."

Feeling highly elated but a trifle self-conscious, Penny followed Editor DeWitt past the photography studio and the A.P. wire room to the main newsroom where reporters were tapping at their typewriters.

"Gang," said Mr. DeWitt in an all inclusive introduction. "This is Penny Parker. She'll be working here for a few weeks."

Heads lifted and appraising eyes focused upon her. Nearly everyone nodded and smiled, but one girl who sat at the far end of a long typewriter table regarded her with an intent, almost hostile stare. And as luck would have it, Mr. DeWitt assigned Penny to the typewriter adjoining hers.

"This is Elda Hunt," he introduced her. "Show Penny the ropes, will you?"

The girl, a blonde, with heavily-rouged cheeks, patted the rigid rolls of her hair into place. Staring at Mr. DeWitt, she answered not a word.

"I'll have a lot to learn," Penny said, trying to make friendly conversation.

Elda shrugged. "You're the publisher's daughter, aren't you?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"Then I don't think you'll have too hard a time," the girl drawled.

Penny started to reply, but thought better of it. Seating herself beside Elda, she unhooded the typewriter, rolled a sheet of copy paper into it, and experimented with the keys.

The main newsroom was a confusion of sound. Although work was being handled with dispatch, there was an air of tension, for press time on the five-star edition was drawing close. Telephones were ringing, and Editor DeWitt, who sat at the head of the big rectangular desk, tersely assigned reporters to take the incoming calls. Not far from Penny's ear, the police shortwave radio blared. Copy boys ran to and fro.

Benny Jewell, the assistant editor, tossed her a handful of typewritten sheets.

"Take these handouts and make 'em into shorts," he instructed briefly.

"Handouts?" Penny asked in bewilderment. "Shorts?"

"Cut the stories to a paragraph or two each."

"Oh," said Penny, catching on. "You want me to rewrite them."

At her elbow, Elda openly snickered.

Color stained Penny's cheeks, but she quietly read the first sheet, which was an account of a meeting to be held the following week. Picking out the most important facts, she boiled the story down to two short paragraphs, and dropped the finished copy into the editor's wire basket.

Only then did Elda speak. "You're supposed to make two carbons of every story you write," she said pityingly.

The girl might have told her sooner, Penny thought. However, she thanked her politely, and finding carbon paper, rewrote the story. In her nervousness she inserted one of the carbons upside down, ruining the impression. As she removed the sheets from the machine, she saw what she had done. Elda saw too, and smiled in a superior way.

"She dislikes me intensely," Penny thought. "I wonder why? I've not done a thing to her."

Aware that she had wasted paper and valuable time,

Penny recopied the story a third time and turned it in to the editor. After that, she rewrote the additional stories with fairly good speed. By watching other reporters she learned that the carbon copies were speared on spindles which at intervals a copy boy collected and carried away.

A telephone rang, and this time, Mr. DeWitt, looking straight at Penny, said: "An obituary. Will you take it?"

She went to the phone and copied down the facts carefully, knowing that while death notices were routine, they were of vital interest to readers of the paper. Any mistake of fact could prove serious.

Returning to her typewriter, she wrote the item. But after she had turned it in, Mr. DeWitt called her to his desk. He was pleasant but firm.

"What day are services to be held?" he asked. "Who are the survivors? Where did the woman die? Furthermore, we never use the word 'Funeral Home'. Instead, we say 'mortuary'."

Penny telephoned for more information, and finally after rewriting the notice twice more, succeeded in getting it past Mr. DeWitt. But as he tossed the story to a copy reader, she saw that he had pencilled several changes.

"There's more to writing routine stories than I thought," she reflected. "I'll really have to dig in unless I want to disgrace Dad."

Penny was given another obituary to write which proved nearly as difficult as the first. Hopelessly discouraged, she started for the rest room to get a drink and wash her hands.

As she entered the lounge, voices reached her ears, and instantly she realized that Elda Hunt was talking to another girl reporter about her.

"The publisher's daughter!" she heard her say scathingly. "As if we aren't having a hard enough time here, without having to coddle her along!"

"I didn't think she seemed so bad," the other replied. "She'll catch on."

"She'll be promoted over all our heads if that's what you mean!" Elda retorted bitterly. "I know for a fact, she's starting at fifty a week, and no experience! If you ask me, it's unfair! We should walk out of here, and see how those fine editors would like that!"

CHAPTER

2

EXPLOSION!

PENNY'S FIRST thought was to accost the two girls and correct the misstatements. But sober reflection convinced her she could make no graver mistake. Far better, she reasoned, to ignore the entire matter.

She quickly washed her hands, purposely making enough noise to draw attention to her presence. Elda and her friend became silent. A moment later, coming through the inner door of the powder room, they saw her, but offered no comment. Penny hastily returned to the newsroom.

For the remainder of the day she worked with deep concentration, only dimly aware of what went on about her. Seemingly there were endless numbers of obituaries to write. Telephones rang constantly. Work was never finished, for as soon as one edition was off the press, another was in the making.

Now and then Penny caught herself glancing toward an empty desk at the far corner of the room.

Jerry Livingston had sat there until a year ago when he had been granted a leave of absence to join the Army Air Force. Unquestionably the *Star's* most talented reporter, he had been Penny's best friend.

"I wish Jerry were here," she thought wistfully. "But if he were, he'd tell me to buckle down and not let this job lick me! Dad warned me it would be hard, monotonous work."

Penny worked with renewed energy. After awhile she began to feel that she was making definite progress. Mr. Jewell, the assistant editor, made fewer corrections as he read over her copy, and now and then she actually saw him nod approvingly. Once when she turned in a rewritten "hand-out"—a publicity story which had been sent to the paper in unusable form—he praised her for giving it a fresh touch.

"Good lead," he commented. "You're coming along all right."

Elda heard the praise and her eyes snapped angrily. At her typewriter, she slammed the carriage. No one noticed except Penny. A moment later, Mr. DeWitt called Elda to his desk, saying severely:

"Watch the spelling of names, Elda. This is the third one we've checked you on today. Don't you ever consult the city directory?"

"Of course I do!" Elda was indignant.

"Well, watch it," Mr. DeWitt said again. "We must have accuracy."

With a swish of skirts, Elda went back to her desk. Her face was as dark as a thunder cloud. Deliberately she dawdled over her next piece of copy. After she had turned it in, she returned to the editor's desk to take it from the wire basket and make additional corrections.

"Just being extra careful of names," she said arrogantly as the assistant editor shot her a quick, inquiring glance.

Thinking no more of the incident, Penny kept on with her own work. She took special care with names, even looking up in the city directory those of which she was almost certain. When she turned in a piece of copy, she was satisfied that not a name or fact was inaccurate.

Late in the afternoon, she noticed that Mr. DeWitt and Mr. Jewell appeared displeased about a story they had found in the Five Star edition of the paper. After reading it, they talked together, and then sorted through a roll of discarded copy, evidently searching for the original. Finally, Mr. DeWitt called:

"Miss Parker!"

Wondering what she had done wrong, Penny went quickly to his desk.

"You wrote this story?" he asked, jabbing a pencil at one of the printed obituaries.

"Why, yes," Penny acknowledged. "Is anything wrong with it?"

"Only that you've buried the wrong man," DeWitt said sarcastically. "Where did you get that name?"

Penny felt actually sick, and her skin prickled with heat. She stared at the story in print. It said that John Gorman had died that morning in Mercy Hospital.

"The man who died was John Borman," DeWitt said grimly. "It happens that John Gorman is one of the city's most prominent industrialists. We've made the correction, but it was too late to catch two-thirds of the papers."

Penny stared again at the name, her mind working slowly.

"But Mr. DeWitt," she protested. "I don't think I wrote it that way. I knew the correct name was Borman. I'm sure that was how I turned it in."

"Maybe you hit a wrong letter on the typewriter," the editor said less severely. "That's why one always should read over a story after it's written."

"But I did that too," Penny said, and then bit her lip, because she realized she was arguing about the matter.

"We'll look at the carbons," decided Mr. DeWitt.

They had been taken from the spindles by copy boys, but the editor ordered the entire day's work returned to his desk. Pawing through the sheets, he came to the one Penny had written. Swiftly he compared it with the original copy.

"You're right!" he exclaimed in amazement. "The carbons show you wrote the name John Borman, not Gorman."

"I knew I did!"

"But the copy that was turned into the basket said John Gorman. Didn't you change it on the first sheet?"

"Indeed I didn't, Mr. DeWitt."

Scowling, the editor compared the two copies. Obviously on the original sheet, a neat erasure had been made, and a typewritten letter *G* had been substituted for *B*.

"There's something funny about this," Mr. DeWitt said. "Mighty funny!" His gaze roved about the typewriter table, focusing for an instant upon Elda who had been listening intently to the conversation. "Never mind," he added to Penny. "We'll look into this."

Later, she saw him showing the copy sheets to the assistant editor. Seemingly, the two men were deeply puzzled as to how the error had been made. Penny had her own opinion.

"Elda did it," she thought resentfully. "I'll wager she removed the sheet from the wire basket when she pretended to be making a correction on her own story!"

Having no proof, Penny wisely kept her thoughts to herself. But she knew that in the future she must take

double precautions to guard against other tricks to discredit her.

At the end of the day, the newsroom rapidly emptied. One by one, reporters covered their typewriters and left the building. A few of the girls remained, among them, Penny and Elda. Editor DeWitt was putting on his hat when the telephone rang.

Absently he reached for it and then straightened to alert attention. Grabbing a sheet of copy paper, he scrawled a few words. Eyes focused upon him, for instinctively everyone knew that something important had happened.

DeWitt hung up the receiver, his eyes staring into space for an instant. Then he seized the telephone again and called the composing room.

"Hold the paper!" he ordered tersely. "We're making over the front page!"

The news was electrifying, for only a story of the greatest importance would bring an order to stop the thundering presses once they had started to roll.

Calling the photography room, DeWitt demanded: "Is Salt Sommers still there? Tell him to grab his camera and get over to the Conway Steel Plant in double-quick time! There's been a big explosion! They think it's sabotage!"

The editor's harassed gaze then wandered over the little group of remaining reporters. Elda pushed toward the desk.

"You want me to go over there, Chief?" she demanded eagerly.

DeWitt did not appear to hear her. Seizing the telephone once more, he tried without success to get two of the men reporters who had left the office only a few minutes earlier.

Slamming down the receiver, his gloomy gaze focused upon Elda for an instant. But he passed her by.

"Miss Parker!"

Penny was beside him in a flash.

"Ride with Salt Sommers to the Conway Plant!" he ordered tersely. "Two men have been reported killed in the explosion! Get everything you can and hold on until relieved!"

Seizing hat and purse, Penny made a dash for the stairway. No need for DeWitt to tell her that this was a big story! Because all the other reporters except Elda were gone, she had been given the assignment! But could she make good?

"This is my chance!" she thought jubilantly. "DeWitt probably thinks I'll fold up, but I'll prove to him I can get the facts as well as one of his seasoned reporters."

Penny was well acquainted with Salt Sommers, who next to Jerry Livingston was her best friend. Reaching the ground floor, she saw his battered car starting away from the curb.

"Salt!" she shouted. "Wait!"

The photographer halted and swung open the car door. She slid in beside him.

"What are you doing here, Penny?" he demanded, shifting gears.

"I'm your little assistant," Penny broke the news gently. "I just started to work on the paper."

"And DeWitt assigned you to this story?"

"He couldn't help himself. Nearly everyone else had left the office."

The car whirled around a corner and raced through a traffic light just as it turned amber. Suddenly from far away, there came a dull explosion which rocked the pavement. Salt and Penny stared at each other with alert comprehension.

"That was at the Conway Plant!" the photographer exclaimed, pushing his foot hard on the gas pedal. "Penny, we've got a real assignment ahead of us!"

CHAPTER

3

SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT

DARKNESS SHROUDED the streets as the press car careened toward the outskirts of the city where the Conway Steel Plant was situated. Rattling over the river bridge, Salt and Penny caught their first glimpse of the factory.

Flames were shooting high into the sky from one of the buildings, and employes poured in panic through the main gate. No policemen were yet in evidence, nor had the fire department arrived.

Pulling up at the curb, Salt seized his camera and stuffed a handful of flashbulbs into his pockets. Grabbing Penny's elbow, he steered her toward the gate. To get through the barrier, they fought their way past the outsurging, panic-stricken tide of fleeing employes.

"Scared?" Salt asked as they paused to stare at the shooting flames.

"A little," Penny admitted truthfully. "Will there be any more explosions?"

"That's the chance we're taking. DeWitt shouldn't have sent you on this assignment!"

"He couldn't know there would be other explosions," Penny replied. "Besides, someone had to cover the story, and no one else was there. I can handle it."

"I think you can too," said Salt quietly. "But you'll have to work alone. My job is to take pictures."

"I'll meet you at the car," Penny threw over her shoulder as she left him.

Scarcely knowing how or where to begin, she ran toward the burning building. One of the smaller storage structures of the factory, it was not connected with the main office. The larger building remained intact. Workmen with an inadequate hose were making a frantic effort to keep the flames from spreading to the other structures.

Penny ran up to one of the men, plucking at his sleeve to command attention.

"What set off the explosion?" she shouted in his ear.

"Don't know," he replied above the roar of the flames.

"Anyone killed?"

"Two workmen. They're over there." The man waved his hand vaguely toward another building.

Unable to gain more information, Penny ran toward the nearby structure. The wind, she noted, was

carrying flames in the opposite direction. Unless there were further explosions, danger of the fire spreading was not great.

Entering the building, she met several men who appeared to be officials of the company.

"I'm looking for Mr. Conway!" she accosted them. "Is he here?"

"Who are you?" one of the men asked bluntly.

"I'm Penny Parker from the *Star*."

"My name is Conway. What do you want to know?"

"How many killed and injured?"

"Two killed. Three or four injured. Perhaps more. We don't know yet."

Penny asked for names which were given her. But when she inquired how the explosion had occurred, Mr. Conway suddenly became uncommunicative.

"I have no statement to make," he said curtly. "We don't know what caused the trouble."

As if fearing that Penny would ask questions he did not wish to answer, the factory owner eluded her and disappeared into the darkness.

Running back to the burning building, Penny caught a glimpse of Salt taking a picture. From another workman she sought to glean additional details of the disaster.

"I was in the foundry when the first blast went off!" he revealed. "Just a minute before the explosion, I

seen a man in a light overcoat and a dark hat, run from the building."

"Who was he?"

"No one I ever saw workin' at this plant. But I'll warrant, he touched off that explosion!"

"Then you think he was a saboteur?"

"Sure."

Penny did not place too much stock in the story, but as she wandered about among the excited employes, she heard others saying that they too had seen the strange man running from the building. No one knew his name nor could they provide an accurate description.

Sirens screamed, proclaiming the arrival of fire engines. As the ladders went up, and streams of water began to play on the blazing structure, Salt snapped several more pictures. His hat was gone, and his face had become streaked with soot.

"I got some good shots!" he told Penny enthusiastically as he sought her at the fringe of the crowd. "What luck you having?"

Penny told him everything she had learned.

"We'll talk with the Fire Chief and then let's head for a telephone and call the office," Salt declared.

As they started toward the fire lines, a strange sound accosted their ears. Hearing it, Salt stopped short to listen. From the gates outside the factory came the rumbling murmur of an angry crowd.

"A mob must be forming!" Salt exclaimed. "Something's up!"

He started for the gate with Penny hard at his heels.

At first they could not see what had caused the commotion. But as the group of angry employes swept nearer the gate, a man in a light overcoat who apparently was fleeing for his life, leaped into a car which waited at the curb.

"Quick!" Penny cried. "Take a picture!"

Salt already had his camera into position. As the car started up, the flash bulb went off.

"Got it!" Salt exclaimed triumphantly.

Penny tried to note the license number of the automobile, but the plate was so covered with mud she could not read a single figure. The car whirled around a corner and was lost to view.

"Salt, that man may have been the one who set off the explosion!" Penny cried. "The mob is of that opinion at least!"

Angry employes now were bearing directly toward Penny and Salt. Suddenly a woman in the crowd pointed toward the photographer, shouting: "There he is! Get him!"

Dismayed, Penny saw then that Salt wore a light overcoat which bore a striking resemblance to the garment of the fleeing stranger. Their builds too were somewhat similar, for both were thin and angular. In the darkness, the mob had failed to see the car

roll away, and had mistaken Salt for the saboteur.

"Let's get out of here!" Salt muttered. "One thing you can't do is argue with a mob!"

He and Penny started in the opposite direction, only to be faced by a smaller group of workmen who had swarmed from another factory gate. Escape was cut off.

"Tell them we're from the *Star!*" Penny urged, but as she beheld the angry faces, she realized how futile were her words.

"They'll wreck my equipment before I can explain anything!" Salt said swiftly. He thrust the camera into her hands. "Here, take this and try to keep it safe! And these plates!"

Empty-handed, Salt turned to face the mob. Not knowing what to do, Penny tried to cut across the street. But the crowd evidently had taken her for a companion of the saboteur, and was determined she should not escape.

"Don't let her get away!" shouted a woman in slacks, her voice shrill with excitement. "Get her!"

A car was coming slowly down the street. Its driver, a woman, was watching the flaming building, and had rolled down the window glass to see better. The window of the rear seat also was halfway down.

As the women of the mob bore down upon Penny, she acted impulsively to save Salt's camera and the precious plates. Without thinking of the ultimate conse-

quence, she tossed them through the open rear window onto the back seat of the moving car.

The driver, her attention focused upon the blazing factory, apparently did not observe the act, for she continued slowly on down the street.

"D F 3005," Penny noted the license number. "If only I can remember!"

The factory women were upon the girl, seizing her roughly by the shoulders and shouting accusations. Penny's jacket was ripped as she jerked free.

"I'm a reporter for the *Star!*" she cried desperately. "Sent here to cover the story!"

The words made not the slightest impression upon the women. But before they could lay hands upon her again, she fled across the street. The women did not pursue her, for just then two police cars rolled up to the curb.

Penny, greatly relieved, ran to summon help.

"Quick!" she urged the policemen. "That crazy mob has mistaken a reporter for one of the saboteurs who escaped in a car!"

With drawn clubs, the policemen battled their way through the crowd. Already Salt had been roughly handled. But arrival of the police saved him from further mistreatment, and fearful of arrest, the mob began to scatter. In another moment the photographer was free, although a bit battered. His coat had been torn

to shreds, one eye had been blackened, and blood trickled from a cut on his lower lip.

"Are you all right?" he asked anxiously as Penny rushed to him.

"Oh, yes! But you're a sight, Salt. They half killed you!"

"I'm okay," Salt insisted. "The important thing is we've got a whale of a story, and we saved the camera and pictures."

A stricken look came over Penny's face.

"Salt—" she stammered. "Your camera—"

"It was smashed?"

"No, I tossed it into a car, but the car went on down the street. How we'll ever find it again I don't know!"

CHAPTER

4

THE MISSING PLATES

SALT DID not criticise Penny when he learned exactly what had happened.

"I'd rather lose a dozen pictures than have my camera smashed," he declared to cheer her. "Anyway, we may be able to trace the car and get everything back. Remember the license number?"

"D F 3005," Penny said promptly, and wrote it down lest she forget.

"Let's call the license bureau and get the owner's name," the photographer proposed, steering her toward a corner drugstore. "Gosh, it's late!" he added, noticing a clock in a store window. "And they're holding the paper for our story and pictures!"

"I certainly messed everything up," Penny said dismally. "At the moment, it seemed the thing to do. When those women started for me, I thought it was the only way to save the camera."

"Don't worry about it," Salt comforted. "I'll get the camera back."

"But how will we catch the edition with your pictures?"

"That's a horse of a different color," Salt admitted ruefully. "Anyway, it's my funeral. I'll tell DeWitt something."

"I'll tell him myself," Penny said firmly. "I lost the pictures, and I expect to take responsibility for it."

"Let's not worry ahead. Maybe we can trace that car if we have luck."

Entering the drugstore, Penny immediately telephoned Editor DeWitt at the *Star*, reporting all the facts she had picked up.

"Okay, that's fine," he praised. "One of our men reporters, Art Bailey, is on his way out there now. He'll take over. Tell Salt Sommers to get in here fast with his pictures!"

"He'll call you in just a minute or two," Penny said weakly.

From another phone, Salt had been in touch with the license bureau. As Penny left the booth to join him, she saw by the look of his face that he had had no luck.

"Couldn't you get the name of the owner?" she asked.

"It's worse than that, Penny. The license was made out to a man by the name of A. B. Bettenridge. He lives at Silbus City."

"Silbus City! At the far end of the state!"

"That's the size of it."

"But how did the car happen to be in Riverview?"

"The man or his wife probably is visiting relatives here, or possibly just passing through the city."

"And there's no way to trace them," Penny said, aghast. "Oh, Salt, I've not only lost your pictures, but your camera as well!"

"Cheer up," Salt said brusquely. "It's not that bad. We're sunk on the pictures, that's sure. But unless the people are dishonest, I'll get the camera again. I'll write a letter to Silbus City, or if necessary, go there myself."

Penny had little to say as she rode back to the *Star* office with the photographer. Editor DeWitt was not in the newsroom when they returned, but they found him in the composing room, shouting at the printers who were "making up the paper" to include the explosion story.

Seeing Penny and Salt, he whirled around to face them. "Get any good pictures?" he demanded.

"We lost all of 'em," Salt confessed, his face long.

"You what?"

"Lost the pictures. The mob tore into us, and we were lucky to get back alive."

DeWitt's stony gaze fastened briefly upon Salt's scratched face and torn clothing. "One of the biggest stories of the year, and you lose the pictures!" he commented.

"It was my fault," Penny broke in. "I tossed the camera and plates into a passing car. I was trying to save them, but it didn't work out that way."

DeWitt's eyebrows jerked upward and he listened without comment as Penny told the story. Then he said grimly: "That's fine! That's just dandy!" and stalked out of the composing room.

Penny gazed despairingly at Salt.

"If you hadn't told him it was your fault, he'd have taken it okay," Salt sighed. "Oh, well, it was the only thing to do. Anyway, there's one consolation. He can't fire you."

"I wish he would. Salt, I feel worse than a worm."

"Oh, buck up, Penny! Things like this happen. One has to learn to take the breaks."

"Nothing like this ever happened before—I'm sure of that," Penny said dismally. "What ought I to do, Salt?"

"Not a thing," he assured her. "Just show up for work tomorrow the same as ever and don't think any more about it. I'll get the camera back, and by tomorrow DeWitt will have forgotten everything."

"You're very optimistic," Penny returned. "Very optimistic indeed."

Not wishing to return through the newsroom, she slipped down the back stairs and took a bus home. The Parker house stood on a knoll high above the winding river and was situated in a lovely district of

Riverview. Only a few blocks away lived Louise Sidell, who was Penny's closest friend.

Reluctant to face her father, Penny lingered for a while in the dark garden, snipping a few roses. But presently a kitchen window flew up, and Mrs. Maude Weems, the family housekeeper called impatiently:

"Penny Parker, is that you prowling around out there? We had our dinner three hours ago. Will you please come in and explain what kept you so long?"

Penny drew a deep sigh and went in out of the night. Mrs. Weems stared at her in dismay as she entered the kitchen.

"Why, what have you done to yourself!" she exclaimed.

"Nothing."

"You look dreadful! Your hair isn't combed—your face is dirty—and your clothes! Why, they smell of smoke!"

"Didn't Dad tell you I started to work for the *Star* today?" Penny inquired innocently.

"The very idea of you coming home three hours late, and looking as if you had gone through the rollers of my washing machine! I'll tell your father a thing or two!"

Mrs. Weems had cared for Penny since the death of Mrs. Parker many years before. Although employed as a housekeeper, salary was no consideration, and she loved the girl as her own child. Penny and

Mr. Parker regarded Mrs. Weems almost as a member of the family.

"Where is Dad?" Penny asked uneasily.

"In the study."

"Let's not disturb him now, Mrs. Weems. I'll just have a bite to eat and slip off to bed."

"So you don't want to see your father?" the housekeeper demanded alertly. "Why, may I ask? Is there more to this little escapade than meets the eye?"

"Maybe," Penny admitted. Then she added earnestly: "Believe me, Mrs. Weems, I've had a wretched day. Tomorrow I'll tell you everything. Tonight I just want to get a hot bath and go to bed."

Mrs. Weems instantly became solicitous. "You poor thing," she murmured sympathetically. "I'll get you some hot food right away."

Without asking another question, the housekeeper scurried about the kitchen, preparing supper. When it was set before her, Penny discovered she was not as hungry as she had thought. But because Mrs. Weems was watching her anxiously, she ate as much as she could.

After she had finished, she started upstairs. In passing her father's study, she saw his eyes upon her. Before she could move on up the steps, he came to the doorway, noting her disheveled appearance.

"A hard day at the office?" he inquired evenly.

Penny could not know how much her father al-

ready had learned, but from the twinkle of his eyes she suspected that DeWitt had telephoned him the details of her disgrace.

"Oh, just a little overtime work," she flung carelessly over her shoulder. "See you in the morning."

Penny took a hot bath and climbed into bed. Then she climbed out again and carefully set the clock alarm for eight o'clock. Snuggling down once more, she went almost instantly to sleep.

It seemed that she scarcely had closed her eyes when the alarm jangled in her ear. Drowsily, Penny reached and turned it off. She rolled over to go to sleep again, then suddenly realized she was a working woman and leaped from bed.

She dressed hurriedly and joined her father at the breakfast table. He had two papers spread before him, the *Star*, and its rival, the *Daily Times*. Penny knew from her father's expression that he had been comparing the explosion stories of the two papers, and was not pleased.

"Any news this morning?" she inquired a bit too innocently.

Her father shot back a quick, quizzical look, but gave no further indication that he suspected she might have had any connection with the Conway Steel Plant story.

"Oh, they did a little dynamiting last night," he re-

plied, shoving the papers toward her. "The *Times* had very good pictures."

Penny scanned the front pages. The story in the *Star* was well written, with her own facts used, and a great many more supplied by other reporters. But in comparison to the *Times*, the story seemed colorless. Pictures, she realized, made the difference. The *Times* had published two of them which half covered the page.

"Can't see how DeWitt slipped up," Mr. Parker said, shaking his head sadly. "He should have sent one of our photographers out there."

"Dad—"

Mr. Parker, who had finished his breakfast, hastily shoved back his chair. "Well, I must be getting to the office," he said. "Don't be late, Penny."

"Dad, about that story last night—"

"No time now," he interposed. "On a newspaper, yesterday's stories are best forgotten."

Penny understood then that her father already knew all the details of her downfall. Relieved that there was no need to explain, she grinned and hurriedly ate her breakfast.

Because her father had taken the car and gone on, she was compelled to battle the crowd on the bus. The trip took longer than she had expected. Determined not to be late for work, she ran most of the way

from the bus stop to the office. By the time she had climbed the stairs to the newsroom, she was almost breathless.

As she came hurriedly through the swinging door, Elda Hunt, cool and serene, looked up from her typewriter.

"Why the rush?" she drawled, but in a voice which carried clearly to everyone in the room. "Are you going to another fire?"

CHAPTER

5

SHADOW ON THE SKYLIGHT

IGNORING THE thrust, Penny hung up her hat and coat and went to work. Neither Editor DeWitt nor his assistant, Mr. Jewell, made any reference to the explosion story of the previous day.

Another reporter had written the "follow-up" on it which Penny read with interest. Cause of the explosion, responsible for more than $40,000 damages, had not yet been determined. However, Fire Chief Schirr had stated that there was evidence the explosion had not been accidental. Several witnesses had reported seeing a man in light overcoat flee from the building only a few minutes before the disaster.

"He must have been the fellow who leaped into that waiting car and escaped!" Penny thought. "And to think, Salt's picture might actually be evidence in the case, if I hadn't thrown it away!"

She was staring glumly at the story when DeWitt

motioned for her to take a telephone call. It was another obituary.

"After muffing a good story, I'll probably be assigned to these things for the rest of my time on the paper," Penny thought as she mechanically scribbled notes.

All morning the obituaries kept coming in, and then there were the hospitals to call for accident reports, and the weather bureau. After lunch, a reporter was needed to interview a famous actress who had arrived in Riverview for a personal appearance. It was just the story Penny wanted to try. She knew she could do it well, for in months past, she frequently had contributed special feature stories to the paper.

Mr. DeWitt's gaze focused upon her for an instant, but he passed her by.

"Elda," he said, and she went quickly to his desk to receive instructions.

Elda was gone a long while on the assignment. When she returned in the afternoon, she spent nearly two hours typing the interview. Several times Editor DeWitt glanced impatiently at her, and finally he said: "Let's have a start on that story, Elda. You've been fussing with it long enough."

She gave it to him. As Mr. DeWitt read, he used his pencil to mark out large blocks of what had been written. But as he gave the story to a copy reader

who would write the headline, he said: "Give her a byline."

Elda heard and grinned from ear to ear. A byline meant that a caption directly under the headline would proclaim: "By Elda Hunt."

Penny, who also heard, could not know that Mr. DeWitt had granted the byline only because it was customary with a personal interview story. She felt even more depressed than before.

"See if you can find a picture of this actress in the photography room," DeWitt instructed Elda. "Salt Sommers took one this morning, but it hasn't come up yet."

With a swishing of skirts, for she now was in a fine mood, Elda disappeared down the corridor. Fifteen minutes elapsed. Penny, busy writing hand-outs and obituaries, had forgotten about her entirely, until Mr. DeWitt summoned her to his desk.

"See if you can find out what became of Elda," he said in exasperation. "Tell her we'd like to have that picture for today's paper."

Penny went quickly toward the photography room. The door was closed. As she opened it, she was startled half out of her wits by hearing a shrill scream. The cry unmistakably came from an inner room of the photography studio and was Elda's voice. At the same instant, a gust of cool air struck Penny's face.

"Elda!" she called in alarm.

"Here," came the girl's muffled voice from the inner room.

Fearing the worst, Penny darted through the doorway. Elda had collapsed in a chair, her face white with terror. Wordlessly, she pointed toward the ceiling.

Penny gazed up but could see nothing amiss. Warm sunshine was pouring through the closed skylight which covered half the ceiling area.

"What ails you, Elda?" she asked. "Why did you scream?"

"The skylight!"

"What about the skylight?" Penny demanded with increasing impatience. "I can't see anything wrong with it."

"Only a moment ago I saw a shadow there," Elda whispered in awe.

"A shadow!" Penny was tempted to laugh. "What sort of shadow?"

"I—I can't describe it. But it must have been a human shadow. I think a man was crouching there."

"Nonsense, you must have imagined it."

"But I didn't," Elda insisted indignantly. "I saw it just before you opened the door."

"Did the skylight open?"

"Not that I saw."

Recalling the cool gust of wind that had struck her face, Penny took thought. Was it possible that Elda actually had seen someone crouching on the skylight? However, the idea seemed fantastic. She could think of no reason why any person would hide on the roof above the photography room.

"Oh, snap out of it, Elda," she said carelessly. "Even if you did see a shadow, what of it?"

"It was a man, I tell you!"

"A workman perhaps. Mr. DeWitt sent me to tell you he was in a hurry for that picture."

"Oh, tell Mr. DeWitt to jump in an ink well!" Elda retorted angrily. "He's always in a hurry."

"You haven't been watching a shadow all this time, I judge," Penny commented.

"Of course not. I went downstairs to get a candy bar."

With a sigh, Elda pulled herself from the chair. She really did look as if she had undergone a bad fright, Penny observed. Feeling a trifle sorry for the girl, she helped her find the photograph, and they started with it to the newsroom.

"I'd not say anything about the shadow if I were you, Elda," Penny remarked.

"Why not, pray?"

"Well, it sounds rather silly."

"Oh, so I'm silly, am I?"

"I didn't say that, Elda. I said the idea of a shadow on the skylight struck me that way. Of course, if you want to be teased about it, why tell everyone."

"At least I didn't make a mess of an important story," Elda retorted, tossing her head.

"Elda, why do you dislike me?" Penny demanded suddenly.

The question was so unexpected that it threw the girl off guard. "Did I say I did?" she countered.

"It's obvious that you do."

"I'll tell you what I dislike," Elda said sharply. "The rest of us here have to work for our promotions. You'll get yours without even turning a hair—just because you're Mr. Parker's one and only daughter."

"But that's not true, Elda. I'm expected to earn my way the same as you. I'm working at a beginner's salary."

"You can't expect me to believe that!"

"Was it because you thought I was making more money than you, that you changed the name on the Borman obituary?"

Elda stopped short. She tried to register indignation, but instead, only looked frightened. Penny was certain of her guilt.

"I haven't told Mr. DeWitt, and I don't intend to," she said quietly. "But I'm warning you! If anything like that happens again, you'll answer for it!"

"Well, of all the nerve!" Elda exploded, but her voice lacked fire. "Of all the nerve!"

Penny deliberately walked away from her.

The day dragged on. At five-thirty Penny covered her typewriter and telephoned Mrs. Weems.

"I'll be late coming home tonight," she said apologetically. "I thought I might get dinner downtown and perhaps go to a show."

"Another hard day?" the housekeeper asked sympathetically.

"Much easier than yesterday," Penny said, making her voice sound cheerful. "Don't worry about me. I'll be home no later than nine."

Though she would not have confessed it even to herself, Penny was reluctant to meet her father at dinner time. He might not ask questions, but his all-knowing, all-seeing eyes would read her secrets. At a glance he could tell that newspaper work was not going well for her, and that she disliked it.

"I certainly won't give him an opportunity to even think, 'I told you so,' " she reflected. "Even if it kills me, I'll stick here, and I'll pretend to like it too!"

Because it was too early to dine, Penny walked aimlessly toward the river. She paused at a dock to watch two boys fishing, and then sauntered on toward the passenger wharves.

A young man in an unpressed suit, and shoes badly

in need of a shine, leaned against one of the freight buildings. Seeing Penny, he pulled his hat low over his eyes, and became engrossed in lighting a cigarette.

She would have passed him by without a second glance, save that he deliberately turned his back to shield his face. The hunch of his shoulders struck her as strangely familiar.

Involuntarily, she exclaimed: "Ben! Ben Bartell!"

He turned then and she saw that she had not been mistaken. The young man indeed was a former reporter for the *Riverview Mirror*, a news magazine published weekly. Ben had not shaved that day, and he looked years older than when she last had seen him.

"Hello, Penny," he said uncomfortably.

"Ben, what has happened to you?" she asked. "Why were you trying to avoid me?"

Ben did not reply for a moment. Then he said quietly: "Why should I want to see any of my old friends now? Just look at me and you have your answer."

"Why, Ben! You were one of the best reporters the *Mirror* ever had!"

"*Were* is right," returned Ben with a grim smile. "Haven't worked there for six months now. The truth is, I'm down and out."

"Why, that's ridiculous, Ben! Nearly every paper in town needs a good man."

"They don't need me."

"Ben, you sound so bitter! What has happened to you?"

"It's a long story, sister, and not for your dainty little ears."

Penny now was deeply troubled, for she had known Ben well and liked him.

"Ben, you must tell me," she urged, taking his arm. "We're going into a restaurant, and while we have dinner together, you must explain why you left the *Mirror*."

CHAPTER

6

BEN'S STORY

BEN HELD back.

"Thanks," he said uncomfortably, "but I think I ought to be moving on."

"Have you had your dinner?" Penny asked.

"Not yet."

"Then do come with me, Ben. Or don't you want to tell me what happened at the *Mirror?*"

"It's not that, Penny. The truth is—well—"

"You haven't the price of a dinner?" Penny supplied. "Is that it, Ben?"

"I'm practically broke," he acknowledged ruefully. "Sounds screwy in a day and age like this, but I'm not strong enough for factory work. Was rejected from the Army on account of my health. Tomorrow I guess I'll take a desk job somewhere, but I've held off, not wanting to get stuck on it."

"You're a newspaper man, Ben. Reporting is all you've ever done, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm finished now. Can't get a job anywhere." The young man started to move away, but Penny caught his arm again.

"Ben, you *are* having dinner with me," she insisted. "I have plenty of money, and this is my treat. I really want to talk to you."

"I can't let you pay for my dinner," Ben protested, though with less vigor.

"Silly! You can take me somewhere as soon as you get your job."

"Well, if you put it that way," Ben agreed, falling willingly into step. "There's a place here on the waterfront that serves good meals, but it's not stylish."

"All the better. Lead on, Ben."

He took her to a small, crowded little restaurant only a block away. In the front window, a revolving spit upon which were impaled several roasting chickens, captured all eyes. Ben's glands began to work as he watched the birds browning over the charcoal.

"Ben, how long has it been since you've had a real meal?" Penny asked, picking up the menu.

"Oh, a week. I've mostly kept going on pancakes. But it's my own funeral. I could have had jobs of a sort if I had been willing to take them."

Penny gave her order to the waitress, taking double what she really wanted so that her companion would not feel backward about placing a similar order. Then she said:

"Ben, you remarked awhile ago that you can't get a newspaper job anywhere."

"That's true. I'm blacklisted."

"Did you try my father's paper, the *Star?*"

"I did. I couldn't even get past his secretary."

"That's not like Dad," Penny said with troubled eyes. "Did you really do something dreadful?"

"It was Jason Cordell who put the bee on me."

"Jason Cordell?" Penny repeated thoughtfully. "He's the editor of the *Mirror,* and has an office in the building adjoining the *Star.*"

"Right. Well, he fired me."

"Lots of reporters are discharged, Ben, but they aren't necessarily blacklisted."

Ben squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"You needn't tell me if you don't wish," Penny said kindly. "I don't mean to pry into your personal affairs. I only thought that I might be able to help you."

"I want to tell you, Penny. I really do. But I don't dare reveal some of the facts, because I haven't sufficient proof. I'll tell you this much. I stumbled into a story—a big one—and it discredited Jason Cordell."

"You didn't publish it?"

"Naturally not." Ben laughed shortly. "I doubt if any newspaper would touch it with a ten-foot pole. Cordell is supposed to be one of our substantial, respectable citizens."

"Actually?"

"He's as dishonorable as they come."

Knowing that Ben was bitter because of his discharge, Penny discredited some of the remarks, but she waited expectantly for him to continue. A waitress brought the dinner, and for awhile, as the reporter ate ravenously, he had little to say.

"You'll have to excuse me," he finally apologized. "I haven't tasted such fine food in a year! Now what is it you want to know, Penny? I'm in a mood to tell almost anything."

"What was this scandal you uncovered about Mr. Cordell?"

"That's the one thing I can't reveal, but it concerned the owner of the Conway Steel Plant. They're bitter enemies you know."

Penny had not known, and the information interested her greatly.

"Did you talk it over with Mr. Cordell?" she asked.

"That was the mistake I made." Ben slowly stirred his coffee. "Cordell didn't have much to say, but the next thing I knew, I was out of a job and on the street."

"Are you sure that was why he discharged you?"

"What else?"

Penny hesitated, not wishing to hurt Ben's feelings. There were several things she had heard about him—that he was undependable and that he drank heavily.

"Most of the things you've been told about me aren't true," Ben said quietly, reading her thoughts. "Jason Cordell started a lot of stories intended to discredit me. He told editors that I had walked off a job and left an important story uncovered. He pictured me as a drunkard and a trouble maker."

"I'll talk to my father," Penny promised. "As short as the *Star* is of employes, I'm sure there must be a place for you."

"You're swell," Ben said feelingly. "But I'm not asking for charity. I'll get along."

Refusing to talk longer about himself, he told Penny of amusing happenings along the waterfront. After dessert had been finished, she slipped a bill into his hand, and they left the restaurant.

Outside, the streets were dark, for in this section of the city, lights were few and far between. Ben offered to escort Penny back to the *Star* office or wherever she wished to go.

"This isn't too safe a part of the city for a girl," he declared. "Especially after night."

"All the same, to me the waterfront is the most fascinating part of Riverview," Penny declared. "You seem to know this part of town well, Ben."

"I should. I've lived here for the past six months."

"You have a room?"

"I'll show you where I live," Ben offered. "Wait until we reach the next corner."

They walked on along the river docks, passing warehouses and vessels tied up at the wharves. Twice they passed guards who gazed at them with intent scrutiny. However, Ben was recognized, and with a friendly salute, the men allowed him to pass unchallenged.

"The waterfront is strictly guarded now," the reporter told Penny. "Even so, plenty goes on here that shouldn't."

"Meaning?"

Ben did not answer for they had reached the corner. Beyond, on a vacant lot which Penny suspected might also be a dumping ground, stood three or four dilapidated shacks.

"See the third one," Ben indicated. "Well, that's my little mansion."

"Oh, Ben!"

"It's not bad inside. A little cold when the wind blows through the chinks, but otherwise, fairly comfortable."

"Ben, haven't you any friends or relatives?"

"Not here. I thought I had a few friends, but they dropped me like a hot potato when I ran into trouble."

"This is no life for you, Ben. I'll certainly talk to my father tomorrow."

Ben smiled and said nothing. From his silence, Penny gathered that he had no faith she would be able to do anything for him.

They walked on, and as they approached a small

freighter tied up at the wharf, Ben pointed it out.

"That's the *Snark*," he informed her.

The name meant nothing to Penny. "Who owns her?" she inquired carelessly.

"I wish I knew, Penny. There's plenty goes on aboard that vessel, but it's strictly hush-hush. I have my suspicions that—"

Ben suddenly broke off, for several men had appeared on the deck of the *Snark*. The vessel was some distance away, and in the darkness only shadowy forms were visible.

Seizing Penny's arm, Ben pulled her flat against a warehouse.

Amazed by his action, she started to protest. Then she understood. Aboard the *Snark* there was some sort of disturbance or disagreement. The men, although speaking in low, almost inaudible tones, were arguing. Penny caught only one phrase: "Heave him overboard!"

"Ben, what's happening there?" she whispered anxiously.

"Don't know!" he answered. "But nothing good."

"Where are the guards?"

"Probably at the far end of their beats."

Aboard the *Snark*, there was a brief scuffle, as someone was dragged across the deck to the rail.

"That'll teach you!" they heard one of the men mutter.

Then the helpless victim was raised and dropped over the rail. Shrieking in terror, he fell with a great splash into the inky waters. Frantically, he began to struggle.

"Those fiends!" Penny cried. "They deliberately threw the man overboard, and he can't swim!"

CHAPTER

7

MAN OVERBOARD!

PENNY AND Ben ran to the edge of the dock, peering into the dark, oily waters. On the deck of the *Snark* there was a murmur of voices, then silence.

Casting a quick glance upward, Penny was angered to see that the men who had been standing there had vanished into a cabin or companionway. Obviously, they had no intention of trying to aid the unfortunate man.

"There he is!" Ben exclaimed, suddenly catching another glimpse of the bobbing head. "About done in too!"

Kicking off his shoes and stripping off his coat, the reporter dived from the dock. He struck the water with an awkward splash, but Penny was relieved to see that he really could swim well. He struck out for the drowning man, but before he could reach him, the fellow slipped quietly beneath the surface.

Close by were two barges lashed together, and the

current would take a body in that direction. Ben jack-knifed and went down into the inky waters in a surface dive. Unable to find the man, he came up, filled his lungs in a noisy gulp, and went down again. He was under such a long time that Penny became frantic with anxiety.

She decided to turn in an alarm for the city rescue squad. But before she could act, Ben surfaced again, and this time she saw that he held the other man by the hair.

As Ben slowly towed the fellow toward the dock, Penny realized that she must find some way to get them both out of the river. She could expect no help from anyone aboard the *Snark*. Gazing upward again, she thought she saw a man watching her from the vessel's bow, but as her gaze focused upon him, he retreated into deeper shadow, beyond view.

No guards were anywhere near, and the entire waterfront seemed deserted. Penny's eyes fastened upon a rope which hung loosely over a dock post. It was long enough to serve her purpose, and finding it unattached, she hurled one end toward Ben.

He caught it on the second try and made a loop fast about the body of the man he towed. Penny then pulled them both to the dock.

"You can't haul us up," Ben instructed from below. "Just hold on, and I think I can get out of here by myself."

He swam off in the darkness and was lost to view. Penny clung desperately to the rope, knowing that if she relaxed for an instant, the man, already half drowned, would submerge for good. Her arms began to ache. It seemed to her she could not hold on another instant.

Then Ben, his clothes plastered to his thin body, came running across the planks.

Without a word he seized the rope, and together they raised the man to the dock. In the darkness Penny saw only that he was slender, and in civilian clothes.

Stretching him out on the dock boards, they prepared to give artificial resuscitation. But it was unnecessary. For at the first pressure on his back, the man rolled over and muttered: "Cut it out. I'm okay."

Then he lay still, exhausted, but breathing evenly.

"You were lucky to get him, Ben," Penny said as she knelt beside the stranger. "If the current had carried him beneath those barges, he never would have been taken out alive."

"I had to dive deep," Ben admitted. "Found him plastered right against the side of the first barge. Yeah, I was lucky, and so is he."

The man stirred again, and sat up. Penny tried to support him, but he moved away, revealing that he wanted no help.

"Who pushed you overboard?" Ben asked.

The man stared at him and did not answer.

Observing that Ben was shivering from cold, and that the stranger too was severely chilled, Penny proposed calling either the rescue squad or an ambulance.

"Not on your life," muttered the rescued man, trying to get up. "I'm okay, and I'm getting out of here."

With Ben's help, he managed to struggle to his feet, but they buckled under him when he tried to walk.

The man looked surprised.

"We'll have to call the rescue squad," Penny decided firmly.

"I have a better idea," Ben supplied. "We can take him to my shack."

Penny thought that the man should have hospital treatment. However, he sided with Ben, insisting he could walk to the nearby shack.

"I'm okay," he repeated again. "All I need is some dry clothes."

Supported on either side, the man managed to walk to the shack. Ben unlatched the door and hastily lighting an oil lamp, helped the fellow to the bed where he collapsed.

"Ben, I think we should have a doctor—" Penny began again, but Ben silenced her with a quick look.

Drawing her to the door he whispered: "Let him have his way. He's not badly off, and he has reason for not wanting anyone to know what happened. If

we call the rescue squad or a doctor, he'll have to answer to a lot of questions."

"There are some things I'd like to know myself."

"We'll get the answers if we're patient. Now stay outside for a minute or two until I can get his clothes changed, and into dry ones myself."

Penny stepped outside the shack. A chill wind blew from the direction of the river, but with its freshness was blended the disagreeable odor of factory smoke, fish houses and dumpings of refuse.

"Poor Ben!" she thought. "He never should be living in such a place as this! No matter what he's done, he deserves another chance."

Exactly what she believed about the reporter, Penny could not have said. His courageous act had aroused her deep admiration. On the other hand, she was aware that his story regarding Jason Cordell might have been highly colored to cover his own shortcomings.

Within a few minutes Ben opened the door to let her in again. The stranger had been put to bed in a pair of the reporter's pajamas which were much too small for him. In the dim light from the oil lamp, she saw that he had a large, square-shaped face, with a tiny scar above his right eye. It was not a pleasant face. Gazing at him, Penny felt a tiny chill pass over her.

Ben also had changed his clothes. He busied him-

self starting a fire in the rusty old stove, and once he had a feeble blaze, hung up all the garments to dry.

The room was so barren that Penny tried not to give an appearance of noticing. There was only a table, one chair, the sagging bed, and a shelf with a few cracked dishes.

"I'll get along with him all right," Ben said, obviously expecting Penny to leave.

She refused to take the hint. Instead she said: "This man will either have to go to a hospital or stay here all night. He's in no condition to walk anywhere."

"He can have my bed tonight," Ben said. "I'll manage."

The stranger's intent eyes fastened first upon Penny and then Ben. But not a word of gratitude did he speak.

"You'll need more blankets and food," Penny said, thinking aloud. "I can get them from Mrs. Weems."

"Please don't bother," Ben said stiffly. "We'll get along."

Though rebuffed, Penny went over to the bedside. Instantly she saw a bruise on the stranger's forehead and a sizeable swollen place.

"Why, he must have struck his head!" she exclaimed, then corrected herself. "But he didn't strike anything that we saw. Ben, he must have been slugged while aboard the *Snark!*"

The stranger turned so that he looked directly into the girl's clear blue eyes. "Nuts!" he said emphatically.

"Our guest doesn't seem to care to discuss the little affair," Ben commented dryly. "I wonder why? He escaped drowning by only a few breaths."

"Listen," said the stranger, hitching up on an elbow. "You fished me out of the water, but that don't give you no right to put me through the third degree. My business is my business—see!"

"Who are you?" demanded Penny.

She thought he would refuse to answer, but after a moment he said curtly: "James Webster."

Both Penny and Ben were certain that the man had given a fictitious name.

"You work aboard the *Snark?*" Ben resumed the questioning.

"No."

"Then what were you doing there?"

"And why were you pushed overboard?" Penny demanded as the man failed to answer the first question.

"I wasn't pushed," he said sullenly.

"Then how did you get into the water?" Penny pursued the subject ruthlessly.

"I tripped and fell."

Penny and Ben looked at each other, and the latter shrugged, indicating that it would do no good to ques-

tion the man. Determined to keep the truth from them, he would tell only lies.

"You can't expect us to believe that," Penny said coldly. "We happened to see you when you went overboard. There was a scuffle. Then the men who threw you in, disappeared. For the life of me, I can't see why you would wish to protect them."

"There are a lot of things you can't see, sister," he retorted. "Now will you go away, and let me sleep?"

"Better go," Ben urged in a low tone. "Anyone as savage as this egg, doesn't need a doctor. I'll let him stay here tonight, then send him on his way tomorrow morning."

"You really think that is best?"

"Yes, I do, Penny. We could call the police, but how far would we get? This bird would deny he was pushed off the boat, and we would look silly. We couldn't prove a thing."

"I suppose you're right," Penny sighed. "Well, I hope everything goes well tonight."

Moving to the door, she paused there, for some reason reluctant to leave.

"I'll take you home," Ben offered.

"No, stay here," Penny said firmly. "I'm not afraid to go alone. I only hope you get along all right with your guest."

Ben followed her outside the shack.

"Don't worry," he said, once beyond hearing of the

stranger. "This fellow is a tough hombre, but I know how to handle him. If he tries to get rough, I'll heave him out."

"I never saw such ingratitude, Ben. After you risked your life to save him—"

"He's just a dock rat," the reporter said carelessly.

"Even so, why should he refuse to answer questions?"

"Obviously, he's mixed up in some mess and doesn't dare talk, Penny. I've always had my suspicions about the *Snark* and her owners."

"What do you mean, Ben?"

Before the reporter could answer, there came a thumping from inside the shack. Welcoming the interruption, Ben turned quickly to re-enter.

"Can't tell you now," he said hurriedly. "We'll talk some other time. So long, and don't worry about anything."

Firmly, he closed the door.

Penny stood there a moment until satisfied that there was no further disturbance inside the shack. Then with a puzzled shake of her head, she crossed the vacant lot to the docks.

"Those men aboard the *Snark* should be arrested," she thought indignantly. "I wish I could learn more about them."

She stood for a moment lost in deep reflection. Then with sudden decision, she turned and walked toward the *Snark*.

CHAPTER

8

A SWINGING CHAIN

APPROACHING THE *Snark*, Penny saw several men moving about on the unlighted decks. But as she drew nearer, their forms melted into the darkness. When she reached the dock, the vessel appeared deserted.

Yet, peering upward at the towering vessel, the girl had a feeling that she was being watched. She was satisfied that the rescue of the man who called himself James Webster had been observed. She was equally certain that those aboard the *Snark* were aware of her presence now.

"Ahoy, the *Snark!*" she called impulsively.

There was no answer from aboard the tied-up vessel, but footsteps pounded down the dock. Penny whirled around to find herself the target for a flashlight. Momentarily blinded, she could see nothing. Then the light shifted away from her face, and she recognized a wharf guard.

"What you doing here?" he demanded gruffly.

Though tempted to tell the entire story, Penny held her tongue. "Just looking," she mumbled.

"Didn't I hear you call out?"

"Yes."

"Know anyone aboard the *Snark?*"

"No."

"Then move along," the guard ordered curtly.

Penny did not argue. Slipping quietly away, she sought a brightly lighted street which led toward the newspaper office. Midway there, she stopped at a corner drugstore to call home and inquire for her father. Mrs. Weems told her that so far as she knew Mr. Parker had returned to the *Star* office to do a little extra work.

"Then I'll catch him there," Penny declared.

"Is anything wrong?" the housekeeper inquired anxiously.

"Just something in connection with a news story," Penny reassured her. "I'll be home soon."

Hanging up the receiver before the housekeeper could ask any more questions, she walked swiftly on to the *Star* building. The front door was locked, but Penny had her own key. Letting herself in through the darkened advertising room, she climbed the stairs to the news floor.

A few members of the Sunday staff were working at their desks, but otherwise the room was deserted.

Typewriters, like hooded ghosts, stood in rigid ranks.

Pausing to chat for a moment with the Sunday editor, Penny asked if her father were in the building.

"He was in his office a few minutes ago," the man replied. "I don't know if he left or not."

Going on through the long newsroom, Penny saw that her father's office was dark. The door remained locked.

Disappointed, she started to turn back when she noticed a light burning in the photography room. At this hour she knew no one would be working there, unless Salt Sommers or one of the other photographers had decided to develop and print a few of his own pictures.

"Dad, are you there?" she called.

No one answered, but Penny heard a scurry of footsteps.

"Salt!" she called, thinking it must be one of the photographers.

Again there was no reply, but a gust of wind came suddenly down the corridor. The door of the photography room slammed shut.

Startled, Penny decided to investigate. She pushed open the door. The light was on, but no one was in the room.

"Salt!" she called again, thinking that the photographer might be in the darkroom.

He did not reply. As she started forward to in-

vestigate, the swinging chain of the skylight drew her attention. The glass panels were closed and there was no breeze in the room. Yet the brass chain swung back and forth as if it had been agitated only a moment before.

"Queer!" thought Penny, staring upward. "Could anyone have come in here through that skylight?"

The idea seemed fantastic. She could think of no reason why anyone should seek such a difficult means of entering the newspaper office. To her knowledge, nothing of great value was kept in the photography rooms.

Yet, the fact remained that the light was on, the chain was swaying back and forth, and a door had slammed as if from a gust of wind.

Studying the skylight with keen interest, Penny decided that it would be possible and not too difficult for a person on the roof to raise the glass panels, and by means of the chain, drop down to the floor. But could a prowler reverse the process?

Penny would have dismissed the feat as impossible, had not her gaze focused upon an old filing cabinet which stood against the wall, almost directly beneath the skylight. Inspecting it, she was disturbed to find imprints of a man's shoe on its top surface.

"Someone was in here!" Penny thought. "To get out, he climbed up on this cabinet!"

The brass handles of the cabinet drawers offered

convenient steps. As she tried them, the cabinet nearly toppled over, but she reached the top without catastrophe. By standing on tiptoe, her head and shoulders would just pass through the skylight.

Pulling the brass chain, she opened it, and peered out onto the dark roof. No one was in sight. In the adjoining building, lights burned in a number of offices.

Suddenly the door of the photography room opened. Startled, Penny ducked down so fast that she bumped her head.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" exclaimed a familiar voice. "What are you doing up there?"

Penny was relieved to recognize Salt. She closed the skylight and dropped lightly to the floor.

"Looking for termites?" the photographer asked.

"Two legged ones! Salt, someone has been prowling about in here! Whoever he was, he came in through this skylight."

"What makes you think so, kitten?" Salt looked mildly amused and not in the least convinced.

Penny told him what had happened and showed him the footprints on the filing cabinet. Only then did the photographer take her seriously.

"Well, this is something!" he exclaimed. "But who would sneak in here and for what reason?"

"Do you have anything valuable in the darkroom?"

"Only our cameras. Let's see if they're missing."

Striding across the room, Salt flung open the door of the inner darkroom, and snapped on a light. One glance assured him that the cameras remained untouched. But several old films were scattered on the floor. Picking them up, he examined them briefly, and tossed them into a paper basket.

"Someone has been here all right," he said softly. "But what was the fellow after?"

"Films perhaps."

"We haven't anything of value here, Penny. If we get a good picture we use it right away."

Methodically, Salt examined the room, but could find nothing missing.

"Perhaps the person, whoever he was, didn't get what he was after," Penny speculated. "I'm inclined to think this isn't his first visit here."

Questioned by Salt, she revealed Elda Hunt's recent experience in the photography room.

"That dizzy dame!" he dismissed the subject. "She wouldn't know whether she saw anything or not."

"Something frightened her," Penny insisted. "It may have been this same man trying to get in. Can't the skylight be locked?"

"Why, I suppose so," Salt agreed. "The only trouble is that this room gets pretty stuffy in the daytime. We need the fresh air."

"At least it should be locked when no one is here."

"I'll see that it is," Salt promised. "But it's not

likely the prowler will come back again—especially as you nearly caught him."

It was growing late. Convinced that her father had left the *Star* building, Penny decided to take a bus home. As she turned to leave, she asked Salt carelessly:

"By the way, did you know Ben Bartell?"

"Fairly well," he returned. "Why?"

"Oh, I met him tonight. He's had a run of hard luck."

"So I hear."

"Salt, what did Ben do, that caused him to be blacklisted with all the newspapers?"

"Well, for one thing, he socked an editor on the jaw."

"Jason Cordell of the *Mirror?*"

"Yes, they got into a fight of some sort. Ben was discharged, and he didn't take it very well."

"Was he a hard drinker?"

"Ben? Not that I ever heard. I used to think he was a pretty fair reporter, but he made enemies."

Penny nodded, and without explaining why the information interested her, bade Salt goodnight. Leaving the *Star* building by the back stairway, she walked slowly toward the bus stop.

As she reached the corner, she heard the scream of a police car siren. Down the street came the ambulance, pulling up only a short distance away. Ob-

serving that a crowd had gathered, Penny quickened her step to see who had been injured.

Pushing her way through the throng of curious pedestrians, she saw a heavy-set man lying unconscious on the pavement. Policemen were lifting him onto a stretcher.

"What happened?" Penny asked the man nearest her.

"Just a drunk," he said with a shrug. "The fellow was weaving all over the street, and finally collapsed. A storekeeper called the ambulance crew."

Penny nodded and started to move away. Just then, the ambulance men pushed past her, and she caught a clear glimpse of the man on the stretcher. She recognized him as Edward McClusky, a deep water diver for the Evirude Salvage Company. She knew too that under no circumstances did he ever touch intoxicating liquors.

"Wait!" she exclaimed to the startled ambulance crew. "I know that man! Where are you taking him?"

CHAPTER

9

THE METAL DISC

"WE'RE TAKING this man to the lockup," the policemen told Penny. "He'll be okay as soon as he sobers up."

"But he's not drunk," she protested earnestly. "Edward McClusky is a diver for the Evirude Salvage Co. Whatever ails him must be serious!"

The policeman stared at Penny and then down at the unconscious man on the stretcher. "A deep sea diver!" he exclaimed. "Well, that's different!"

Deftly he loosened the man's collar, and at once his hand encountered a small disc of metal fastened on a string about his neck. He bent down to read what was engraved on it.

"Edward McClusky, 125 West Newell street," he repeated aloud. "In case of illness or unconsciousness, rush this man with all speed to the nearest decompression lock."

"You see!" cried Penny. "He's had an attack of the bends!"

"You're right!" exclaimed the policeman. He consulted his companions. "Where is the nearest decompression chamber?"

"Aboard the *Yarmouth* in the harbor."

"Then we'll rush him there." The policeman turned again to Penny. "You say you know this man and his family?"

"Not well, but they live only a few blocks from us."

"Then ride along in the ambulance," the policeman suggested.

Penny rode in front with the driver, who during the speedy dash to the river, questioned her regarding her knowledge of the unconscious man.

"I don't know much about him," she confessed. "Mrs. Weems, our housekeeper, is acquainted with his wife. I've heard her say that Mr. McClusky is subject to the bends. Once on an important diving job he stayed under water too long and wasn't properly put through a decompression lock when he came out. He is supposed to have regular check-ups from a doctor, but he is careless about it."

"Being careless this time might have cost him his life," the driver replied. "When a fellow is in his condition, he'll pass out quick if he isn't rushed to a lock. A night in jail would have finished him."

"Will he be all right now?"

"Can't tell," was the answer. "Even if he does come out of it, he may be paralyzed for life."

"Do you know what causes bends?" Penny inquired curiously.

"Nitrogen forms in bubbles in the blood stream," the driver answered, and drew up at the waterfront.

Penny followed the stretcher aboard the *Yarmouth*. In the emergency of offering quick treatment to McClusky, no one heeded her. The man was rushed into the air lock and placed on a long wooden bench.

A doctor went into the chamber with him, signaling for the pressure to be turned on. Bends could be cured, Penny knew, only by reproducing the deep water conditions under which the man previously had worked. Pressure would be raised, and then reduced by stages.

"How long will it take?" she asked a man who controlled the pressure gauges.

"Ordinarily only about twenty minutes," he replied. "But it will take at least two hours with this fellow."

"Will he come out of it all right?"

"Probably," was the answer. "Too soon to tell yet."

To wait two hours was out of the question for Penny. After discussing the matter with police, she agreed to notify Mrs. McClusky of her husband's dif-

ficulty. Glad to be rid of the duty, they dropped her off at the house on West Newell street.

Mrs. McClusky, a stout, red-faced woman with two small children clinging to her skirts, seemed stunned by the news.

"Oh, I knew this would happen!" she cried. "Ed has been so careless lately. Thank heavens, he was taken to the decompression chamber instead of the police station! A good friend of Ed's lost his life because no one understood what was wrong with him."

Penny called a taxicab for Mrs. McClusky while she excitedly bundled up the children.

"Bless you, for letting me know and for helping Ed," the woman murmured gratefully as she climbed into the cab. "Will you tell me your name?"

"Oh, I'm just a reporter at the *Star*," Penny returned carelessly. "I do hope your husband suffers no ill effects."

The taxi rattled away. With a tired sigh, Penny hastened on home. Lights burned downstairs, and both her father and Mrs. Weems had waited up for her.

"Now don't ask me where I've been," the girl pleaded, as she tossed her hat into a chair and collapsed on the sofa. "What a night! I've had enough adventures to fill a book."

Despite her admonition, both Mrs. Weems and her

father plied her with questions. Penny told them about the deep sea diver and then worked back to the story of what had happened in the photography room.

"Are you certain anyone came through the skylight?" her father asked dubiously. "It doesn't sound convincing to me."

"Footprints don't lie, Dad. They were on top of the cabinet."

"The janitor may have stood on it to fix a light bulb or something."

Penny became slightly nettled. "I'm sure someone was sneaking around in that room tonight!" she declared flatly. "And it wasn't the janitor either!"

"I'll order the skylight kept locked except during office hours," Mr. Parker declared, yawning. "Any further adventures?"

"Plenty," Penny said, "but they'll keep until morning. There's just one thing I want to ask you. Are you in need of a good male reporter?"

Mr. Parker came instantly to life. "Just lead me to him," he said. "I'm desperate."

"Then why not hire Ben Bartell?"

Mr. Parker's face lost all animation. "I couldn't do that," he commented.

"Why not?"

"He's not the type of reporter I want on my paper."

"Exactly what do you mean?"

"Oh, Penny, I don't like to go into all this with you.

Ben has a bad reputation. He's hot tempered and unreliable."

"Because he got into a fist fight with Jason Cordell?"

"Yes, and he foments trouble among employes. I have enough problems without adding him to the list."

"Ben didn't strike me as a trouble maker. Who told you about him?"

"Why, I don't remember—Jason Cordell, I suppose."

"That's just the point!" Penny cried. "Cordell hated him because Ben gained damaging evidence against him! Then to protect himself, Cordell told lies about Ben and got all of Riverview's publishers to blacklist him!"

"What gave you that idea, Penny?"

"I talked to Ben tonight."

"It strikes me he filled you with hot air," the newspaper owner commented dryly. "Penny, you must learn not to believe everything you hear."

"Then you'll not consider hiring Ben?"

"Afraid not," her father declined. "I've no special liking for Jason Cordell, who always impressed me as a stubborn, unscrupulous fellow, but I certainly can't employ Ben without more evidence in his favor than you have presented."

"There is more," said Penny, "but I'm too tired to tell you tonight."

She went wearily to bed, and though she slept hard, still felt tired when the alarm went off the next morning. Hastening through breakfast, she rode with her father to the office, and en route related to him how Ben had rescued the stranger from the river.

"Commendable," nodded her father, "but it still doesn't prove he isn't a trouble maker."

"Oh, Dad, I think you're being unfair to him."

"And I think you have been unduly influenced," Mr. Parker returned. "However, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll have Mr. DeWitt investigate the young man. If his findings are good, we'll give him another chance."

"Oh, Dad! That's grand!" Penny cried, squeezing his arm.

At the office, Penny found a letter tucked behind the roller of her typewriter. Although addressed to her, it had been sent to the *Star*. Instantly she knew the reason, for it was from Jerry Livingston, who had worked for the paper many years.

Eagerly, she ripped open the envelope and read the message. Jerry, in an Army camp in the west, expected to pilot a big bomber to Hawaii within the next few weeks. "Best regards to the newspaper gang," he concluded.

"Any news from Jerry?" inquired Mr. DeWitt, who had recognized the handwriting.

Penny gave him the letter to read.

"Let's tack it on the bulletin board," the editor suggested. "Jerry has a lot of friends here."

Penny allowed him to keep the letter and thought no more of it. Soon she became absorbed in the morning's work. There were obituaries to write as usual, but now and then Mr. DeWitt gave her a more interesting task. Seemingly he had forgotten about her unfortunate experience at the fire.

But Penny had not forgotten. It troubled her that Salt's camera remained missing. When he came to the desk to drop a handful of finished pictures, she asked him what he had learned.

"Haven't been able to trace the car yet," he answered. "But we'll locate it eventually. Don't worry about it, Penny."

The morning wore on. She saw Elda Hunt read Jerry's letter on the bulletin board, and later giggle and laugh as she talked with other girls in the office.

"That little witch said something uncomplimentary about me!" Penny thought. "If I weren't the publisher's daughter, I certainly would tangle with her! Maybe I will yet!"

At twelve o'clock, she put on her hat, intending to go to lunch. As she turned toward the wooden barrier gate, she saw that the receptionist was talking to a male visitor.

"I don't know the name of the girl," she heard him

say distinctly, "but she saved my life. I know she works on the *Star* and I want to thank her."

He turned then and saw her. "Why, she looks like the one my wife described!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. McClusky!" Penny greeted him, extending her hand. "I'm so glad you're up and around today. How do you feel?"

"Fine!" he boomed in a voice which carried to every desk in the room. "Thanks to you. Aren't you the girl who saved my life?"

"I asked the police to take you to the *Yarmouth* if that's what you mean," Penny said self-consciously. "As for saving your life—"

"You certainly did, and the doc will say the same thing. Another ten minutes and I'd have been too far gone to have pulled out of it. Now I'll be okay—at least unless I have another attack of bends."

"I'm very glad you're feeling better," Penny said, edging away. She was painfully conscious that all of the reporters were listening to the conversation. All noise in the office had ceased.

"If there's anything I can do for you, just let me know!" the diver offered heartily.

"Sometime when I need a good waterfront story, I may call on you," Penny said jokingly.

"If I can give you a tip on anything, I sure will," he promised. "I know every inch of the river, and most of the folks that live along 'er."

"Have you heard of a boat called the *Snark?*" Penny asked impulsively.

McClusky's expression changed. He lowered his voice. "Sure, I know the *Snark*," he nodded soberly. "And here's a little tip. If you want a story—a good hot one with plenty o' trouble hooked up to it, then just go hunting around her berth. Maybe sometime I can help you."

With a friendly nod, he was gone.

CHAPTER

10

COUNTRY SKIES

NO MORE was said to Penny about her unfortunate experience at the Conway Steel Plant explosion, but she considered herself responsible for Salt's lost camera. Although the plates no longer would have picture value from the newspaper standpoint, she thought that they might provide a clue to the identity of the man who had escaped by automobile.

Police had been unsuccessful in apprehending any of the persons responsible for the explosion, and the story had died out of the newspapers.

After working for a week at the *Star*, Penny was tired in body and worn in mind. However, she was beginning to enjoy the routine. To receive her first hard-earned pay check gave her a real thrill of pleasure.

Louise Sidell, a school girl friend who lived near the Parker home, asked Penny how she planned to spend the money.

"I think I'll have the check framed," Penny laughed.

She and Louise were sitting on the front steps of the Parker home, watching a chattering squirrel on the lawn. It was a warm, sunny day with scarcely a cloud coasting around in the azure sky.

"Wish we could have a picnic or go to the country," Louise commented wistfully.

"Why not?" Penny asked, getting up. "I intended to drive to the waterfront this morning and see how Ben Bartell is making out. Then we could go out into the country from there."

"Who is Ben Bartell?" Louise inquired with interest.

Penny related her experience near the *Snark*, telling of the stranger who had been given shelter by the newspaper reporter.

"Ben probably has learned all about him by this time," she added. "Shall we stop there?"

"Let's," agreed Louise enthusiastically.

Dressed in comfortable slacks, the chums prepared sandwiches, and then, in Penny's battered old car, drove to the waterfront.

"I haven't much gasoline, so we can't go far," she warned as they parked not far from the vacant lot where Ben's shack stood. "Wonder if anyone will be here?"

Walking across the lot which was strewn with tin cans and rocks, they tapped lightly on the sagging door of the shack. Almost at once it was opened by

Ben who looked even less cheerful than when Penny last had seen him.

"Well, how is your patient this morning?" she inquired brightly.

"He's gone," replied Ben flatly. "My watch with him!"

"Your watch!"

Ben nodded glumly. "That's the thanks a fellow gets! I saved his life, took him in and gave him my bed. Then he repays me by stealing my watch and my only good sweater. It makes me sick!"

"Oh, Ben, that is a shame! You didn't learn who the man was?"

"He wouldn't put out a thing. All I know is that his first name was Webb."

"Did you try to find him at the *Snark?*" Penny questioned.

"Sure, but there they just raise their eyebrows, and say they never heard of such a person. So far as anyone aboard that tub is concerned, no one ever fell into the brink either!"

"Ben, why not report to police?"

"I considered it, but what good would it do?" Ben shrugged. "The watch is gone. That's all I care about."

"But those men aboard the *Snark* must be criminals! We know they pushed Webb off the boat."

"Probably had good reason for doing it too," Ben

growled. "But we can't prove anything—no use to try."

"Ben, you're just discouraged."

"Who wouldn't be? I had planned on pawning that watch. It would have kept me going for a couple of weeks at least. I'd join the Army, only they've turned me down three times already."

Penny and Louise had not expected to stay long, but with the reporter in such a black mood, they thought they should do something to restore his spirits. Entering the dingy little shack, Penny talked cheerfully of her newspaper experiences, and told him that she had spoken to her father about adding him to the editorial staff.

"What'd he say?" the reporter demanded quickly.

"He promised to look into the matter."

"Which means he doesn't want me."

"Not necessarily. My father takes his time in arriving at a decision. But it always is a just one."

"Well, thanks anyhow," Ben said gloomily. "I appreciate how you've tried to help, Penny. It's just no use. Maybe I'll pull out of here and go to another city where I'm not known."

"Don't do that," Penny pleaded. "Sit tight for a few days, and something will break. I'm sure of it."

Knowing that Ben was too proud to take money, she did not offer any. But before leaving, she gave him a generous supply of their picnic food, and invited him to ride along into the country.

"No, thanks," he declined. "I would only spoil the fun. I'm in no mood today for anything except grouching."

The visit, brief as it was, tended to depress the girls. However, once they were speeding along the country road, their spirits began to revive. By the time they had reached a little town just beyond the state line, they had forgotten Ben and his troubles.

"Let's stop somewhere near Blue Hole Lake," Penny proposed. "This locality is as pretty as we'll find anywhere. Besides, I haven't much gasoline."

"Suits me," agreed Louise, amiable as always.

Finding a grove within view of the tiny lake, they spread out their picnic lunch. Afterwards, they stretched flat on their backs beneath the trees and relaxed.

"It's getting late," Penny finally remarked regretfully. "Time we're starting home."

"I want a drink of water first," Louise declared. "Pass me the thermos, will you please?"

"It's empty." Penny uncorked the bottle and held it upside down. "But we can stop at a farmhouse. I see one just up the road."

Returning to the car, they drove a few hundred yards down the highway, pulling up near a large two-story frame house which bore a sign in the front yard: "Tourist rooms."

In response to their knock on the side door, a pleas-

ant, tired-faced woman of mid-fifty came to admit them.

"I'm full up," she said, assuming that they wished to rent a room. "My last suite was taken by the professor and his wife."

Penny explained that all they wanted was a drink of water.

"Goodness, just help yourselves at the well!" the woman exclaimed. "Wait, I'll fetch a clean glass."

The deep well, which operated with a chain and a crank, was situated in a vine-covered summer house only a few yards away. The farm woman, who said her name was Mrs. Herman Leonard, showed them how to operate it. The water, coming from deep in the earth, was cool and sweet.

"It must keep you quite busy, running a tourist home," Penny said to make conversation.

"Indeed, it does," sighed the woman. "Most of my roomers aren't so bad, but this last couple runs me ragged. They seem to expect hotel service."

"The professor and his wife?"

"Yes, Professor and Mrs. Bettenridge."

"Bettenridge," Penny repeated alertly. "I've heard that name before. Does the professor come from Silbus City?"

"He never said. But he's an inventor, and he brought his invention with him."

"What sort of invention is it?"

"A light ray machine which explodes mines on land or sea. The affair is very complicated."

At Penny's expression of doubt, Mrs. Leonard added: "It really works too! The first night the professor came here, he exploded a mine out in the lake. Such a splash as it made! I saw it with my own eyes! The professor expects to sell it to the Army or Navy for a lot of money."

"If it will do all he claims, why hasn't the government taken it over before this?"

"Oh, it takes a long while to complete negotiations," Mrs. Leonard replied. "The professor is expecting an officer here tomorrow to witness another demonstration."

"Where is the machine kept? In your house?"

"Oh, dear no! The professor has it in a little shack down by the lake. You can see the place from here."

Mrs. Leonard led the girls a short distance from the summer house, pointing through the trees to a knoll at the edge of Blue Hole Lake.

"The professor and his wife went down there a few minutes ago," she revealed. "Why don't you ask them to show you the invention? They might do it."

"I doubt if we have time."

"Oh, let's take time," Louise urged. "It sounds so interesting, Penny."

Thus urged, Penny agreed, and with her chum, walked down the hill toward the lake.

"It sounds fishy to me," she declared skeptically. "Probably this professor is just a crack-pot who thinks he has a wonderful invention, but hasn't."

"Mrs. Leonard said she saw a successful demonstration."

"I know, Lou. But how could a light ray machine explode mines that were under water? Why, if it could be done, military warfare would be revolutionized!"

"Unbelievable changes are coming every day."

"This one certainly is unbelievable! I'll take no stock in it unless I see the machine work with my own eyes!"

Approaching the shack, the girls saw no one. The door was closed. And it was locked, Penny discovered, upon testing it.

"No one here," she said in disappointment.

"They must be around somewhere," Louise declared, unwilling to give up. "Maybe that car belongs to them."

A sedan stood in a weed-grown lane not far away. Penny, turning to gaze carelessly at it, suddenly became excited.

"Lou, this trip has been worth while!" she cried. "Look at the license number of that auto! It's D F 3005!"

CHAPTER

11

A FAMILIAR CAR

LOUISE GAZED again at the automobile parked in the lane and at its mud-splattered license number.

"D F 3005," she read aloud. "What about it, Penny?"

"Why, that is the number of the car that went off with Salt Sommers' camera and plates the night of the big explosion," her chum explained excitedly.

"You're sure it's the same auto?"

"It certainly looks like it. Now I remember! Salt traced the license to an owner named Bettenridge!"

Hopeful of recovering the lost property, Penny, with Louise close at her side, tramped through the high grass to the deserted lane. Apparently the car owner had not gone far, for the doors had not been locked.

Penny climbed boldly in. A glance assured her that the camera or plates were not on the back seat where they had been tossed. As Penny ran her hands

beneath the cushions, Louise plucked nervously at her skirt.

"Someone is coming, Penny! A man and a woman! They're heading straight toward this car."

"All the better," declared Penny, undisturbed. "If they own the car, we may be able to learn what became of Salt's property."

The man, middle-aged, was tall and thin and wore rimless glasses. He walked with a very slight limp. His wife, a striking brunette, who appeared many years his junior, might have been attractive had she not resorted to exaggerated make-up.

"Good afternoon," the professor said, eyeing the girls sharply. "My car seems to interest you."

"I was searching for something I thought might be on the back seat," Penny explained.

"Indeed? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I was looking for a camera and plates."

"I regret I still fail to follow you," the man said stiffly. "Why should our car contain a camera? My wife and I take no interest in photography."

"Aren't you Professor Bettenridge?"

"I am."

Penny gazed again at the car. "This must be the automobile," she said, deeply troubled. "On the night of the Conway Steel Plant explosion, I tossed a camera and photographic plates into the back seat to prevent them being destroyed by a mob."

"Not this car," said the professor with quiet finality. "I have not been in Riverview for nearly a month."

"A woman who resembled your wife was driving the car."

"Are you accusing me of stealing a camera?" the woman demanded angrily.

"Oh, no! Certainly not! I just thought—" Penny became confused and finished: "The camera was expensive and didn't belong to me."

"I know nothing about the matter! You certainly have your nerve accusing me!"

"Come, come," said the professor, giving his wife a significant, warning glance. "There is no need for disagreement. The young ladies are quite welcome to search the car."

"We've already looked," Penny admitted. "The camera isn't there."

"Isn't it possible you were mistaken in the automobile?"

"I may have jotted down a wrong license number," Penny acknowledged reluctantly. "I'm sorry."

She turned to leave.

"That's quite all right," the professor assured her, his tone now becoming more friendly. "Do you girls live near here?"

"In Riverview," Louise supplied eagerly. "We drove over for a picnic. Mrs. Leonard told us about your light ray machine!"

"Indeed." Professor Bettenridge looked none too pleased.

"She said you might be willing to show it to us."

"Mrs. Leonard displays a remarkable interest in our affairs," Mrs. Bettenridge commented sarcastically.

Again her husband shot her a warning glance.

"My dear, it is only natural that she should be interested in such an amazing machine as ours," he said. "I see no reason why the young ladies should not view it."

"Oh, may we?" Louise cried eagerly.

Although his wife scowled with displeasure, the professor bade the girls follow him to the nearby shack. The door was padlocked and he opened it with a key.

Inside, the room was bare of furniture. There were a few boxes and a large table upon which rested a sizeable object covered with canvas.

"My secret ray machine is expected to revolutionize warfare," the professor said proudly. "Behold the product of fifteen years of faithful work!"

Dramatically he jerked aside the canvas cover, revealing a complicated mechanism of convex and concave mirrors which rotated on their bases. In the center of the machine was a small crystal ball.

"How does it operate?" Louise asked, deeply impressed.

"I am afraid a technical explanation would be too

involved for you to understand. Briefly, a musical note produced on the crystal globe, is carried by ultra violet ray to the scene of the mine. The vibration will cause any unstable substance such as melinite to explode."

"And you claim you actually can explode mines with this machine?" Penny asked.

"I not only claim it, I have demonstrated the machine's powers," Professor Bettenridge replied. "How I do it, of course, is my own secret."

"Will you explode a mine for us now?" Louise questioned eagerly.

Professor Bettenridge looked mildly amused. "My dear young lady," he said. "Do you realize that mines are very expensive? I have been able to obtain only a few, and naturally I must save them for official tests."

"Of course," stammered Louise. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Besides, the demonstrations have a certain element of danger," the professor resumed. "I never give one without my assistant."

Penny, who had been studying the machine with increasing interest, remarked that a story about it might make an interesting feature for the *Star*. To her surprise, the professor did not seem to favor the idea.

"You are employed by a newspaper?" he inquired.

"Yes, the *Star*."

"I must ask you to say nothing about this matter," the professor directed. "Under no circumstance could I permit a story to be written about my work."

"But why?"

"Publicity at this time might rob me of an opportunity to sell the machine. A very prominent man, James Johnson, is now considering its purchase."

"But I thought you were expecting to sell your invention to the government," Penny said, puzzled.

Professor Bettenridge bit his lip. Obviously, he was beginning to share his wife's annoyance at the girls.

"I regret I can't tell you all the details of my negotiations," he said. "My wife and I are very tired, so if you will excuse us—"

"Certainly," said Penny, taking the hint. "Louise and I must be on our way to Riverview."

They started to leave, but before they could reach the door, someone tapped lightly on it. Professor Bettenridge and his wife exchanged a quick glance which Penny could not fathom. For a fleeting instant, she thought they both looked frightened.

Then the professor went to the door and opened it. A little man in a derby hat and with an apologetic manner stood on the threshhold.

"Mr. Johnson!" exclaimed the professor, extending his hand. "My wife and I did not expect you until tomorrow."

"I came a little sooner than I planned," the newcomer admitted. "A business conference I had expected to attend was postponed until tomorrow. Naturally, that has upset my schedule. I had hoped you might consent to a demonstration of your machine tonight."

"Tonight?" The professor seemed caught off guard. "But that is impossible!"

"Impossible?" inquired Mr. Johnson. "Why?"

"For one thing, my assistant is not here."

"Can't you get in touch with him?"

"I doubt it. Besides, I have another engagement." The professor hesitated and added: "Officials of the Navy have invited me to confer with them tonight at the Gables Hotel in Riverview. I rather expect them to make me a very attractive offer for my invention."

"But you promised me first option on it!" Mr. Johnson protested. "If necessary, I can wait for the demonstration tomorrow night, though it will greatly inconvenience me."

"Tomorrow at eight o'clock," the professor nodded. "If you should care to put up a small sum of money as a guarantee of your intentions, I promise to make no final deal with the Navy until after that time."

"Why, yes," Mr. Johnson agreed, taking out his check book. "Any amount you say."

Feeling themselves no longer welcome by the Bettenridges, Penny and Louise slipped quietly away.

As they climbed the hill they could hear the professor and Mr. Johnson discussing the amount to be paid.

"It's a graft, if you ask me," Penny declared. "Poor Mr. Johnson seems hypnotized."

"I wish we could see that test tomorrow night!"

"So do I. In fact, I'd be willing to bet the machine won't work."

"What makes you think so?"

"Just my doubting nature, I suppose. No, there's more to it than that, Lou. Didn't you notice how startled the Bettenridges were when their star customer appeared?"

"They did look a bit upset."

"And the professor refused to give a demonstration tonight, although obviously it would have been to his advantage."

"He explained he had an engagement with Navy men."

"Which I suspect was all a made-up story. No, Lou, there must be another reason why the professor was unwilling to give the demonstration. He probably knows his machine won't work."

"You're convinced he's a fraud."

"Yes, I am," Penny said. "Furthermore, I believe he knows what became of Salt's camera."

"We can't prove anything."

"No, but if he would steal a camera he might also take to swindle in a big way."

"There's nothing we can do unless we want to report him to the police."

"I have a little idea," Penny confessed. "As soon as we reach Riverview I propose to check the Gables Hotel and learn if any Navy men have registered there. By talking to them, we may get at the truth."

CHAPTER

12

THE PROFESSOR'S HELPER

CLIMBING THE hill, Penny and Louise sought their parked car. The day had been an interesting one, replete with surprises, and yet another surprise was in store.

As they were ready to drive away, a man came slowly down the road, cut across the Leonard yard and vanished down a path which led toward Blue Hole Lake.

"See that fellow!" Penny exclaimed.

"Why, yes," agreed Louise, surprised by her chum's tense manner. "What about him?"

"I'm sure he's Webb!"

"Webb?"

"The man who was pushed off the *Snark* and who stole Ben's watch!"

"What would he be doing here?"

"That's exactly what I want to learn! I'd like to

get Ben's watch back for him!" Quickly Penny pushed open the car door and jumped out.

"What are you going to do, Penny?" Louise asked anxiously.

"Follow that man and learn for certain who he is!"

"But it's late," Louise protested. "Besides, he looks like an unpleasant sort of individual."

Penny paid no heed, but started off in pursuit of the stranger. He had already disappeared among the trees and was well on his way toward the lake. Not wishing to be deserted, Louise quickly followed her chum.

"He's going to the professor's shack!" Penny observed a moment later.

"Perhaps he is another prospective buyer of the secret ray machine," Louise speculated. "Business seems to be rushing today."

Penny was not convinced. "I'm sure it is Webb," she declared. "If we can force him to admit his identity, we may get Ben's watch back."

Not wishing to attract attention, the girls paused behind a large rock on the hillside. From there they could watch the man without being seen.

He walked directly to the shack and tapped on the door. In a moment it was opened by the professor, who looked anything but pleased to see the new arrival. Closing the door behind him as if fearful that Mr. Johnson would hear, he stepped out of doors.

The girls were too far away to overhear the con-

versation, but they saw the two men talk earnestly together for a moment. Then the man they believed to be Webb, walked on down the hill toward the lake's edge. Professor Bettenridge reentered the shack.

"Now what?" inquired Louise, straightening up from a cramped position behind the rock.

"Let's follow Webb. I have a hunch he may be the assistant Professor Bettenridge told Mr. Johnson about."

"But the man wasn't expected here until tomorrow."

"Which may or may not have been true, Lou. There's more to this deal than meets the eye. Let's see what we can learn."

Already the man had disappeared from view, so the girls walked swiftly after him. Reaching the lake's edge, they saw him striding along the sandy beach. Apparently he had no suspicion that he was being trailed, for he did not glance backward.

Presently the girls noticed another shack which had been erected in a clump of trees a few yards back from the beach. It was much smaller than the other little house, a mere box-like structure with a flat, low roof.

Walking directly toward it, the man unfastened a padlock and went inside. He closed the door behind him.

"Now what is he doing in there?" Penny fretted,

as minutes elapsed and the man remained inside the building. "Listen!"

Both girls could hear a peculiar grinding sound as if from machinery turning inside the shack. The building was windowless, so it was impossible to see what was going on.

"This is maddening!" Penny muttered with increasing impatience. "I wonder—?" She broke off, and gazed thoughtfully at the flat roof of the shack.

"Lou, how is that building lighted?" she demanded.

"From here it looks as if there might be double panels of glass in the roof—a make-shift skylight."

"Lou, if we could get up there, we might be able to see what is going on!"

"And get caught too!"

"Not if we're careful. We can climb that tree which brushes against it, and perhaps see from there."

"What if we should be caught?"

"We'll decide that part when the time comes," Penny chuckled. "This should be fun."

Circling the shack, they climbed into the low-hanging boughs of a giant, scraggly maple tree. Inch by inch lest they make a sound which would betray them, they climbed out on the heavy branches.

"Penny, we're taking an awful chance," her chum murmured nervously. "If that man should look up—"

"He won't," Penny whispered confidently. "He's too busy with whatever he's doing."

Lying flat on the branch, she could look directly through the glass. In the room below she saw at least four large, oval-shaped mines without detonators, made of steel.

Evidently the man had finished whatever work had brought him to the shack, for he laid aside a tool, and then went out the door, carefully locking it behind him again.

"We were too late," Penny whispered in disgust after the man was a safe distance down the beach. "I wish I knew why he came here! One thing is certain, he's mixed up with Professor Bettenridge on this secret ray invention."

"Do you still believe the man is the one who was pushed off the *Snark?*"

"Yes, I do, and that part we can learn!" Realizing that much valuable time was being wasted, Penny slid down from the tree, snagging a stocking in the process. She helped Louise to reach the ground.

"What's the plan now?" her chum asked.

"Webb evidently is returning either to Professor Bettenridge's shack or to town. Let's overtake him and I'll ask a few questions. After helping fish him out of the river, I certainly have the right."

The man walked directly toward the shack which contained the secret ray apparatus, but when he drew close, paused and whistled twice as if in signal. No response came from within the cabin. Seemingly the

man expected none, for he turned and selected a trail which led toward the road.

At that moment, the shack door opened. Professor Bettenridge, his wife, and Mr. Johnson came out together, chatting pleasantly. Without paying the slightest heed to Webb, they walked toward the farmhouse.

"What do you make of all that?" Louise asked in perplexity.

"I'm not sure," Penny admitted. "But I have a suspicion the professor doesn't want Mr. Johnson to know Webb is here today. He might insist on a test of the secret ray machine."

"Why all the mystery? Professor Bettenridge certainly can't expect to sell the invention unless he can give a successful demonstration."

"I suspect that may be the point, Lou. Things aren't properly set for a successful test today. Tomorrow night may be a different story."

"But if the machine is as good as the professor claims, it should explode mines as well one time as another."

"It should," Penny agreed, "but whether or not it does, is a horse of a different color. My guess is that the professor is a fraud, and that Webb helps him in his scheme."

The man believed to be Webb walked so rapidly that the girls realized they would lose sight of him

unless they hastened on. Cutting across a field, they were able to get ahead of him.

"Yes, it's Webb," Penny whispered as they waited for the man to approach. "I'm certain."

Not until he was quite close did the man see the girls. Momentarily startled at recognizing Penny, he ignored her, and would have passed without a word.

"Webb!" she exclaimed. "Don't you remember me?"

The man halted, gazing at her with ice-cold, unfriendly eyes.

"Webb ain't my name," he said gruffly. "I never saw you before."

"You may not remember. I helped pull you out of the river after you had fallen from the deck of the *Snark*."

"Are you coo-coo?" the man demanded. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," Penny said, losing patience. "You stayed with Ben Bartell at his shack by the river. For saving your life, you repaid him by stealing his watch!"

"Say, young lady, better be careful what you're sayin'!" the man snapped. "No one can accuse me of being a thief!"

"I want Ben's watch."

The man started on down the road, but Louise and Penny stood their ground, blocking his way.

"I want the watch!" Penny repeated firmly. "If you won't give it up, I'll report you to the police."

"Oh, you will, eh?" The man whirled toward her, his face convulsed with anger. "You'll get no watch from me, but here's something to teach you to mind your own business!"

With a cruel laugh, he pushed her so hard that she sprawled backwards into the ditch.

CHAPTER

13

BEHIND OFFICE DOORS

"ARE YOU hurt, Penny?" Rushing to her chum, Louise helped her out of the ditch where she had fallen.

"No!" Angrily, Penny brushed dust from her slacks. "But I'm as mad as a hornet! If that man thinks he can push me around—"

Already Webb was well down the road, walking at a leisurely but arrogant pace.

"Forget it, forget it," Louise soothed. "We'd get no place picking a quarrel with a man like that. Anyway, you more or less accused him of thievery."

"And a thief is exactly what he is!" Penny retorted. "There isn't a doubt in my mind that he's the one who stole Ben's watch!"

"Then the thing for us to do is report him to the police. We'll get nowhere talking to him ourselves."

"We'll stop in town—I think the place is called

Newhall—and notify the sheriff," Penny decided. "I certainly shall ask for the man's arrest."

Returning to the car, she turned it around, and they drove toward the town, less than a half mile away. Soon they approached Webb who was walking at the side of the pavement. Deliberately, he ignored them as they passed.

At Newhall, the girls found the sheriff, and rather excitedly, poured out their story. Although the official took a few notes, he seemed somewhat bored by it all.

"You don't know the last name of the man," he recited. "You think he may be employed by Professor Bettenridge, but you are not sure. You believe he may be a thief, but you are not positive of that either."

"One thing I am sure of!" Penny exclaimed. "He pushed me into a ditch. So at least he's guilty of that!"

"Are you willing to sign charges and appear against the man?"

"You mean I would have to come back here later on?"

"Certainly."

Penny's enthusiasm waned. "Maybe I couldn't get here," she said, thinking of her newspaper work. "Oh, well, let it go."

"I'll keep an eye on the man anyhow," the sheriff

promised. "Think you have the situation sized up wrong though. We've already investigated Professor Bettenridge. He has fine credentials, and his invention seems to have merit."

"You believe it actually will explode mines?" Penny asked incredulously.

"I saw it done. Fact is, Professor Bettenridge invited me to the first demonstration he gave at the lake."

"What happened?" Louise questioned eagerly.

"A mine was dumped into the lake. Then the professor exploded it with his machine. I didn't understand how it was done, but I saw the flames shoot up when it went off. It was the real thing."

Decidedly let-down, Penny and Louise took leave of the sheriff and drove to Riverview. But as they passed through the downtown section, Penny suddenly stopped in front of the Gables Hotel.

"I suppose I'm silly," she acknowledged, "but I still doubt the honesty of Professor Bettenridge. Just for the fun of it, I intend to run in here and learn if those Navy officials are registered."

Leaving her chum in the car, Penny was gone nearly fifteen minutes. When she returned, her face had taken on animation, so Louise knew she had interesting news.

"Just as I thought!" Penny exclaimed, sliding behind the steering wheel. "Not a Navy officer regis-

tered in the hotel, and none expected! So how could Professor Bettenridge have an appointment here tonight? He merely told Mr. Johnson that to impress him."

"It does look that way. Still, it's possible the officers might have registered at another hotel."

"Possible but hardly probable. Lou, I believe Professor Bettenridge is a crook. I wish we could witness that demonstration of his tomorrow night!"

"I'll never be able to go," Louise said regretfully. "I'm playing in a recital—worse luck."

"I might get Salt to ride over with me," Penny thought aloud. "Well, we'll see."

The following morning she took time from her work to seek the photographer. He was in the darkroom, but the door was open. As she stepped inside, he whirled around, his face startled.

"Oh, it's you!" he chuckled in relief.

"Why, Salt!" Penny teased. "You acted as if you thought I might be a holdup man. Why so jumpy?"

"Was I?" the photographer asked, his tone queer.

"You certainly were. Anything wrong?"

"This place was entered again last night," Salt said reluctantly. "I can't figure it out."

"Anything taken?"

"Not a thing so far as I can discover. That's the strange part of it. But the films were disturbed, as if someone had searched through them."

"How did the person get in?"

"Apparently through the skylight. It was ordered locked, but it got hot in here yesterday. One of the boys opened it up, and then forgot to snap the lock."

"Did you search the roof?"

"Yes, we found footprints leading to a hall window of the next building. That was as far as they could be traced."

"Do you suppose it could be anyone from the adjoining building, Salt?"

"Not necessarily. The person may have entered it from the street. We know he stepped out onto the roof from the hall window rather than from one of the office rooms."

Before returning to the newsroom, Penny told Salt about yesterday's adventure in the country.

"I sure would like a chance to go there with you tonight," he declared promptly. "Maybe we can get my camera back, even if those birds deny having seen it."

The morning passed slowly, and Penny found it difficult to keep her mind on her work. Elda, however, no longer bothered her. With more important problems to worry about, Penny was not the least bit wounded by the little slurring remarks the girl made.

At noon she lunched on a sandwich and chocolate at a corner drugstore close to the *Star* building. With

half an hour to spend, she suddenly was struck by an idea.

"Why don't I talk to Jason Cordell, the *Mirror* editor, about Ben?" she thought. "Perhaps their difficulties are based on misunderstanding."

Crossing the street to the *Mirror* building, she found Mr. Cordell's office on the third floor. There, a secretary asked her to wait a few minutes.

Apparently an argument was in progress within the inner room, for she heard angry voices. Then a door slammed. Presently, Penny was told that she might go in.

Mr. Cordell sat at his desk, a scowl on his face. He was busy writing and barely glanced up as she entered. Finally he looked straight at her, demanding: "Well?" in a tone which sapped Penny's courage.

She wished she might retreat, but it now was too late.

"I—I am Miss Parker," she stammered. "My father is publisher of the *Star*."

"Oh, yes, yes indeed," the editor now became more friendly, and Penny took heart.

"I came to talk to you about one of your former employes—Ben Bartell."

A mask-like expression came over Mr. Cordell's face. He waited for Penny to continue.

"You discharged Ben, I believe. He's had a very hard time ever since."

"Indeed? Is he a friend of yours?"

"In a way. I feel sorry for him and I want to find newspaper work for him."

"Then why doesn't your father give him a job on the *Star?*"

Penny was prepared for the question. "I think my father would if he were assured that Ben had done nothing so very dishonorable. That's why I came to you. Why was he discharged?"

"Unfortunately, I can't reply to that question. Nor can I assure you that Ben was discharged on a trivial offense. The opposite is true."

"But what did he do?"

Mr. Cordell arose. "I am sorry, I can't discuss it, Miss Parker. If you will excuse me for saying so, I think the matter really is not your concern. My advice would be to leave Ben Bartell entirely alone. He sent you here, I suppose?"

"Indeed, he didn't."

"Where is Ben now?"

"Living in a shack on the waterfront. Because you blacklisted him, he has been unable to get a newspaper job anywhere."

Mr. Cordell's smile was hard and triumphant. Penny knew then that she had made a grave error in thinking she might appeal to the man's sympathies. Obviously, he was highly pleased to learn of Ben's difficulties.

"I am sorry I can't help you," the editor said coldly. "Do drop in again sometime."

He opened the door for her, a pointed hint that she was to go.

As she stepped out into the outer waiting room, a man who evidently expected to see the editor, arose. He had entered the outer office only a few minutes before, and this was the first time that Penny had seen him. Upon recognizing him, she stopped short, for it was Webb.

"You can go in now, Mr. Nelson," the secretary told Webb.

Bestowing a sneering smile upon her, he entered the private office.

Then the door closed.

CHAPTER

14

A NOTE FROM BEN

AFTER WEBB had gone into Mr. Cordell's office, Penny debated her next action. Could Webb and Cordell be friends? Or was this merely a business call? In any case, the two men were obviously of such different type and personality that she failed to understand what basis there might be for a friendship.

Deciding she could accomplish nothing by waiting and questioning Mr. Cordell, she left the office. As she passed down the corridor, an open window at its far end, drew her attention.

Pausing for an instant, she glanced out upon the rooftop of the *Riverview Star* building. The tin flooring, only a few feet below the level of the sill, easily could be reached by anyone climbing through the window.

Tempted to take a short cut to the office, Penny impulsively stepped through the opening. From the

rooftop she could see the city spread out below in rigid pattern, and to the eastward, the winding river.

Crossing the dusty floor to the skylight above the *Star* photography room, Penny peered curiously down. No one was visible below.

"I wonder if a person really could get through that skylight," she speculated. "It would be quite a feat, but I believe it could be done."

A star athlete in high school, Penny felt a challenge. Giving no thought to her clothes, she squeezed through the narrow opening and snagged her sweater. As she freed herself, she noticed a tiny bit of blue cloth that had impaled itself on the nail.

The cloth was not from Penny's garments, and looked as if it might have been torn from a man's wool suit. Freeing it from the nail, she slipped it into her pocket for later examination.

Now, with her feet dangling into space, she considered how she was to get down into the room below. No longer was it possible to swing from the opening to the top of a filing cabinet, for Salt had carefully moved the heavy case to the far side of the room.

Seizing the skylight chain, Penny swung downward. The tiny brass rings cut into her hands and half-way down, she was forced to let go, dropping to the floor with a loud thump.

From the inner photography room came a terrified

scream. Elda Hunt, her face white with fear, appeared in the doorway.

"You!" she exclaimed, recovering from the shock of Penny's unexpected entry.

"Now take it easy, Elda," Penny advised, brushing dirt from her sweater. "I was only experimenting."

"Experimenting!"

"I wanted to see if it would be possible for a person to get into this room through the skylight. It *is* possible!"

"You don't say!" Elda commented sarcastically. "I'll bet you were the one who pulled that stunt in the first place!"

"How ridiculous!" Penny was irritated. Not wishing to discuss the matter, she turned and walked out of the photography room.

In the corridor she met Salt Sommers who stopped her to ask when they were to visit Professor Bettenridge in the country.

"Eight o'clock tonight, if you're willing to go," Penny said eagerly. "I very much want to see the professor demonstrate his ray machine for Mr. Johnson."

"And I want to find out what became of my camera," Salt added grimly. "Is it a date?"

Penny nodded.

"Then suppose we start right after dinner. Can you meet me here at seven o'clock?"

"Let's make it a little earlier," Penny suggested. "I have a hunch that by getting there before the start of the demonstration we may learn more."

"Okay," agreed Salt. "Make it six-thirty."

Having over-stayed her lunch hour, Penny quickly washed her grimy hands and returned to her desk. As she sat down at the typewriter, she noticed a sealed letter thrust behind the roller. Addressed to her, the writing was in a bold scrawl she did not recognize.

Curiously, she scanned the message. It was written on cheap tablet paper and had been signed with Ben Bartell's name.

"See me if you can," was all it said. "I have a little information about the *Snark*."

Tucking the note into her pocketbook, Penny began to plan how she could visit Ben that day. She would not be off until five o'clock, and she had promised to meet Salt at six-thirty. If she were to get any dinner and see Ben at the waterfront, it would mean fast stepping.

Only by an effort of will could Penny keep her mind on the work before her. There were rewrites to do, and an interesting feature. At four-thirty with two stories yet to be done, she became panicky that she could not finish on time. But by really digging in, she completed the stories exactly on the dot of five, and with a tired sigh of relief, dropped them into Editor DeWitt's wire copy basket.

"You're just like a trained race horse, Penny," he said jokingly. "But your work is okay. You're improving."

Penny brightened at the praise, for Editor DeWitt was not given to complimentary words as a rule. Hurriedly washing carbon paper stains from her hands, she caught a bus which took her within a block of Ben's shack.

Smoke curled from the chimney, and as she thumped on the sagging door, she detected the odor of cooking bacon.

"Come in, come in!" Ben greeted her heartily. "You're just in time to share my supper. You got my note?"

"Yes, I did, Ben. What's up?"

Without answering, the former reporter stepped aside for her to enter. The room was much cleaner than when Penny last had visited it. Ben looked better too. Although his clothes remained unpressed, his hair had been cut, and there was a brightness to his eyes which she instantly noted.

"You've found work?" she surmised.

"Odd jobs," Ben answered briefly. "After talking to you I made up my mind I'd better snap out of it. If I can't find newspaper work, I'll try something else."

"I was thinking—" Penny sat down in a rickety

chair, "—couldn't you do free lance work? Write stories for newspapers out of town?"

"Without a typewriter? I put mine in hock months ago, and it finally was sold for charges."

"I have a typewriter at home, Ben. I'll lend it to you."

Ben's face brightened, but he hesitated. "I've sure been lost without a machine," he declared. "But I hate to take yours. You know what happened to my watch. This shack isn't safe. Anyone might come in here and steal it."

"It's only an old typewriter, Ben. I'm willing to take a chance. I'll see that you get the machine within a day or so."

The former reporter stepped to the stove to turn the bacon. He kept his face averted as he said: "Penny, you've been a real friend—the only one. That day when you met me—well, I didn't give a darn. I was only one step from walking off a dock."

"Don't say such things, Ben!" Penny warned. "You've had a run of hard luck, but it's changing now. Suppose you tell me what you learned about the *Snark*."

"Nothing too startling, so don't get your hopes up," Ben grinned.

He set out two cracked plates on the battered table, two cups for coffee, and then dished up the bacon and

a few fried potatoes. It was a meagre supper, but not for the world would Penny have offended Ben by refusing to share it.

"Now tell me about the *Snark*," she urged again, as Ben poured the coffee.

"I've been watching the boat at night, Penny. Queer things go on there."

"We suspected that after seeing Webb pitched overboard."

"I've seen a lot of men come and go from that vessel," Ben resumed. "It's a cinch they couldn't all be employed on her, because the *Snark* has been out of service for months."

"What do you make of it?"

"Oh, the *Snark* is being used as a meeting place—that's obvious. Just for the fun of it, I sneaked aboard last night."

"What did you learn, Ben?"

"The men were having a confab in one of the cabins. I couldn't hear much, but enough to gather that they are afraid Webb will talk to the police."

"About what, Ben?"

"Didn't learn that part. I aim to keep tab on the place for a while."

Penny told of seeing Webb that afternoon and also of his association with Professor Bettenridge.

"A secret ray machine, my eye!" Ben exploded. "You may be sure it's a fake if Webb has anything

to do with it! Penny, this is no business for you to be mixed up in. Webb is a dock rat and as surly an egg as I ever met. You ought to give him a wide berth."

"I'll certainly be careful," Penny promised, arising. "Sorry to leave you with the dishes, Ben, but I must run or I'll be late for another appointment."

She really hated to go, for she saw that her companionship had made the young man more cheerful. Ben walked with her through the waterfront district, and then reluctantly said goodbye.

Hastening along the shadowy street, Penny noticed the large electric sign on top of the Gables Hotel.

Impulsively, she stopped at the hotel.

"That Navy official Professor Bettenridge spoke of may have arrived," she thought. "Just to make certain, I'll inquire again."

CHAPTER

15

THE DEMONSTRATION

PENNY WAS due to meet Salt Sommers in ten minutes, but if she were late, she knew he would not leave without her.

Entering the crowded hotel, she waited her turn at the desk and then inquired if any Navy officers had registered.

"Not to my knowledge," the clerk replied, consulting the register. "No, we've not had a Navy man in for at least a week."

"Any Army officers?"

"The last was a sergeant who checked out two weeks ago. Most of our guests rent on a monthly basis. We have only a few rooms for transient guests."

"Can you tell me if a Professor Bettenridge has called here in the last few days?"

"Not while I've been at the desk."

The information convinced Penny she had not mis-

judged the professor. She now was satisfied he never had arranged with Navy officers to inspect his ray machine. Instead, he had misinformed Mr. Johnson, no doubt hoping to impress him that others were interested in the invention.

Quickly leaving the hotel, Penny hastened on to the news office. As she passed near the loading platform, Salt hailed her from a car parked there.

"Here I am," he called.

Penny slid into the front seat beside him, apologizing for being late.

"That's okay," returned Salt, shifting into gear. "But we haven't much time unless we hurry. You know the way, don't you?"

"I do by daylight. And I think I can find the farmhouse, even if it should get dark before we reach there."

Salt was a fast and very skillful driver. He chose the less frequented streets and soon they were in the open. They made excellent time, reaching their destination just as it began to grow dark.

"How shall we explain to the professor?" Penny inquired dubiously as the photographer parked the car under an oak tree along the highway. "He may think it strange that I returned."

"Let him," said Salt, unconcerned. "I'm here to get my camera."

"Don't go at him too hard," Penny pleaded. "After

all, there is a chance I was mistaken about the license number. In my excitement the night of the explosion, I may have remembered a wrong figure."

"That's so," Salt acknowledged gloomily. "Well, we'll see."

"Why not pretend we're here to get a feature story for the *Star?*" Penny suggested impulsively. "That way, I could ask him all the questions I like about the secret ray machine."

"Any way you want to do it," Salt agreed amiably.

He locked the car and they walked to the farmhouse. Learning that the professor and his wife were at the lake, they trudged down the lane.

"Wait!" Penny suddenly warned in a whisper.

Clutching Salt's arm, she drew him into the shadow of a tree. At first he could not understand the need for caution. Then as Penny pointed, he saw a hunched figure with a lighted lantern, walking along the lake shore away from the cabin where Professor Bettenridge's ray machine was kept.

"There goes Webb now!" Penny whispered. "He's evidently going to the shack where the mines are stored."

"What's he carrying?" Salt inquired.

Although too far away to see plainly, they thought that he had a small satchel tucked under his arm. As he drew closer they discerned that it was leather, and

apparently used as a container for a long cylinder-shaped object.

Passing a short distance away, the man did not see Salt or Penny. They watched until they saw the red glow of his lantern vanish over a hillock.

"That's the foot-path to the shack where the mines are stored," Penny commented. "I wonder what's inside the satchel?"

"Shall we try to find out?"

"Let's talk to Professor Bettenridge first," Penny proposed, going down the lane.

The door of the cabin stood slightly ajar. Inside the lighted room were the professor, his wife, Mr. Johnson, and several other persons Penny had never seen before. However, she took them to be town residents who had heard of the test and were eager to see it.

"Well, professor," they heard Mr. Johnson say jovially. "We're all here, so why not go ahead? Show us what the machine will do."

"All in good time, all in good time," the professor rejoined. "You must give my assistant an opportunity to drop the mine into the lake. He will signal us by lantern when he is ready."

Penny tapped on the door. The professor whirled around, decidedly startled. Then, observing Salt and Penny, he abruptly came over to speak to them.

"Well?" he asked in a tone which was not friendly.

"We came to see the demonstration," Penny said brightly.

"Glad to have you," the professor replied, though without cordiality.

"We want to write a feature story about your machine too," Penny continued. "For the newspaper."

The request displeased the professor. Scowling, he said curtly:

"I am sorry, but there must be no publicity at this time—orders of the Navy, you know."

"The Navy is interested in buying your machine?" Penny asked, hoping to lead him on.

"The deal is concluded except for my signature," the professor said, darting a quick glance at Mr. Johnson. "I should have signed at once, but I promised Mr. Johnson first chance to buy the machine."

"I suppose the Navy men are in town now?" Penny inquired.

"In Riverview."

"At the Gables Hotel?" Penny pursued the subject.

The professor looked at her sharply, for the first time suspecting that she was inducing him to reveal far too much.

Without answering, he turned his back, and began to talk to Mr. Johnson about technical details of the machine.

"I am convinced it is a wonderful invention," the latter declared. "But before I invest $200,000, I must

be absolutely certain that it will do everything you claim."

"You shall not be disappointed," reassured the professor. "Only be patient for a few minutes, and you will witness a demonstration that will convince you beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Ignored by the professor and his wife, Penny and Salt did not enter the cabin. Instead, they walked a short distance away to discuss their next move.

"The demonstration won't start for a few minutes," the photographer said. "Suppose we ankle down to the lake and find out what Webb is doing."

Proceeding down the path which led around the lake shore, they soon sighted the man's glowing lantern. He had set it down on the ground while he trundled out one of the heavy mines from the shack. As they watched from a distance, he loaded it into a boat, picked up the lantern, and slowly rowed out into the lake.

"Apparently he's going to drop it overboard for the test," Salt said. "While he's out there, let's take a look in the shack."

He tried the door. It was locked.

"I don't know how it's done, but I'm sure those mines are doctored in some way," Penny declared. "Louise and I saw Webb working on one when we were here yesterday, but what he did I couldn't guess."

"We'll learn nothing here," Salt said. "Let's go

back to the cabin and see how the professor pulls off the demonstration. Apparently he has Mr. Johnson two-thirds convinced already."

"Whatever you do, don't get into an argument with the professor about your camera until after the test," Penny pleaded as they started up the slope again. "I want to watch the demonstration. If you accuse him of deliberately keeping the camera, he may throw us out."

"Okay, I'll wait," Salt promised.

Reaching the cabin, the pair became instantly aware of a tenseness in the attitude of the professor and his wife. Although they did not tell the newcomers they were unwelcome, it was evident by their expressions that they distrusted Penny and Salt.

Professor Bettenridge stood behind his machine, explaining its many parts to the awed spectators. Penny could make nothing of the technical jargon.

"The demonstration will soon start," the professor declared, looking at his watch. "I will turn on the motors now, as they must heat for several minutes."

He turned several switches and the room was filled with a low humming sound. Two tiny lights buried deep in the complicated mechanism began to glow a cherry red. The professor bent low over the machine, frowning thoughtfully. He adjusted three of the concave mirrors, and switched on another motor.

Despite a dubious attitude, Penny found herself be-

coming deeply impressed. Was it possible, she wondered, that she had misjudged the professor and his machine? She dismissed the thought. The mine never would explode unless it had been tampered with —she was certain of that.

"Watch closely now," the professor directed. "At any moment my assistant will signal with his lantern that he has dropped the mine and is safely away from the area."

The professor's wife had gone to the doorway. Tensely she watched the lake. Minutes passed. Then from out on the water, there came a moving circle of red—the signal from Webb.

"Now!" exclaimed the professor's wife.

Everyone in the little cabin held his breath. Dramatically, Professor Bettenridge took a metal tuning fork and struck it sharply against the crystal ball in the center of his machine.

"It will take a moment for the sound to reach the lake," he said softly. "But only a moment. Watch closely."

All persons in the room crowded to the door and the windows. Suddenly a huge burst of flame appeared on the lake, fanning out on the surface of the water. A moment later came the dull boom of a terrific explosion.

CHAPTER

16

SUSPICION

EVERYONE WHO witnessed the spectacular demonstration was awed by the sight of the flames rising above the lake. As they died away, Professor Bettenridge, strutting a bit, walked back to his machine and covered it with the canvas hood.

"Now are you satisfied?" he inquired triumphantly. "Is there anyone here who doubts the remarkable possibilities of my invention?"

"It was a fine demonstration! Magnificent!" approved Mr. Johnson, fairly beside himself with excitement. "I am convinced of the machine's worth and if we can agree upon terms I will write you a check tonight."

Professor Bettenridge's expression did not change, but the brief glance he flashed his wife was not lost upon Penny or Salt.

"You understand, of course," he said smoothly,

"that the Navy probably will insist upon ultimate purchase of the machine even if I relinquish ownership?"

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Johnson. "I should expect to make such a sale. The machine would have no practical use except in warfare."

Penny was tempted to ask the man if he considered it patriotic to try to obtain control of a machine in the hope of selling it to the government at a high profit to himself. But she wisely remained silent.

Salt, however, had a few pointed remarks to offer.

"How come," he observed, "that if this invention is so remarkable, the Navy hasn't already snapped it up?"

Professor Bettenridge froze him with a glance. "Young man," he said cuttingly, "you evidently do not understand how government business is conducted. Negotiations take months to complete. My wife and I need cash, so for that reason, we are willing to sell the machine quickly."

"Yesterday I understood you to say that Navy men were ready to complete the deal," Penny interposed innocently. "Did they change their minds?"

"Certainly not!" Professor Bettenridge's dark eyes flashed, and only by great effort did he maintain control of his temper. "You understand that while their recommendation would eventually be acted upon, a sale still would take many months to complete."

"Will your machine explode mines on land as well as in the water?" Salt inquired.

"Of course!"

"Then why not give us a land demonstration?"

"Us!" the professor mocked, his patience at an end. "Young man, you were not invited here, and I might add that your presence irritates me! Are you in any way associated with Mr. Johnson?"

"I am not."

"Then kindly do not inject yourself into our negotiations."

"The young man raises an interesting point," Mr. Johnson interposed, frowning thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should have a land demonstration before I pay over the money."

"So you doubt my honesty?" the professor demanded.

"Not at all. It's only that I must be very careful before I purchase such an expensive machine. I must satisfy myself that it will do everything you claim for it."

"You have just witnessed a successful demonstration. What more do you ask?"

"A successful water test," Salt remarked softly, "does not necessarily mean a successful land test."

"I think we should have a land test," Mr. Johnson decided. "If you convince me that the machine will

work equally well under such circumstances, I will write the check instantly."

"A land test is impossible," the professor said stiffly.

"But why?" inquired Mr. Johnson.

"The dangers are too great. Windows would be smashed for many miles around. Authorities would not permit such a test. Only with the greater difficulty did I obtain permission to discharge the mines under water."

"I had not thought of that," Mr. Johnson acknowledged. He hesitated, and it was evident that in another moment he would decide to purchase the machine without further tests.

"Mr. Johnson, I suppose you have witnessed tests made with your own mines," Penny interposed. "Or have they all been made with those supplied by the professor?"

The remark infuriated Mr. and Mrs. Bettenridge, as she had expected it would.

"You and this young man are trying to discredit my machine!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Please leave."

"Why, certainly," agreed Penny, but made no move to depart.

Seeds of suspicion already had been implanted in Mr. Johnson's mind.

"The young lady is right," he said. "I should request a test on a mine which I provide myself."

"Ridiculous!" snapped the professor. "The machine will work equally well on any mine."

"Then surely you should not object to one further test?"

"The delay is unnecessary."

"I am certain I can provide a mine within two days," insisted Mr. Johnson. "Suppose we set the next test for Thursday night at this same hour?"

Thus trapped, Professor Bettenridge could not refuse without losing the sale. Scowling, he gave in.

"Very well. But this will be the final demonstration. If you are not satisfied Thursday night, the deal is off."

"Agreed," said Mr. Johnson.

Bowing to the Bettenridges, he departed. Others who had witnessed the demonstration began to melt away. Only Salt and Penny remained.

Professor Bettenridge closed the door so that the conversation would not be overheard. Then he turned angrily to the pair.

"Now what's your little game?" he demanded. "You deliberately tried to queer my sale? Why?"

"Mr. Johnson seems like such an innocent little rabbit, maybe we thought he ought to be protected," Salt drawled.

"Protected! Why, he's being given the opportunity of a lifetime! How much is it worth to you to keep out of my affairs?"

"Not a cent," Salt retorted. "We don't want any part of your deal. But there's something I did come here for—my camera."

"I've already told the young lady I know nothing about it. If you were stupid enough to throw it into a passing automobile, then you deserve to lose it. Now get out!"

Salt was tempted to argue the matter, but Penny took his arm, pulling him toward the door. The professor slammed it hard behind them as they went out into the night.

"That fellow is a crook!" Salt exploded. "I'll bet a cookie he has my camera too!".

"Well, we can't prove it," Penny sighed. "After all, we did act in a high-handed way. We may have queered his sale to Mr. Johnson."

"A good thing if we have."

"But we have no proof the machine is a fake. With our own eyes we saw the mine explode. Of course, we think Webb tampered with it in some fashion, but we're not certain of that either."

"The proof of the pudding will come Thursday night when and if the old boy explodes Mr. Johnson's mine."

"He's just clever enough to do it, too," Penny said gloomily.

The couple had walked only a short distance up the lane when they were startled to hear a shrill

whistle in the darkness. It came from the beach.

Halting, they waited. In a moment the sound was repeated. Then to their surprise, came an answering whistle from inside Professor Bettenridge's cabin.

"That must be Webb," Salt whispered, observing a shadowy form approaching. "The whistle evidently is a signal to make certain the coast is clear."

As they watched, the hunched figure emerged from the darkness, was silhouetted momentarily in the light which came from the cabin, then disappeared inside.

"I wish we knew what they were talking about in there," Penny said. "It might clear up some of the mystery."

"Why not see what we can learn?" proposed Salt. "It's safe enough."

Taking care to walk softly, the pair stole back to the cabin. Crouching by the window, they could hear a low murmur of voices inside. At first it was difficult to catch the trend of the conversation, but gradually Professor Bettenridge's voice grew louder.

"I don't like it any better than you do," Salt and Penny heard him say, "but that's the way it is. If we're to finish the deal, we've got to explode one of Johnson's mines Thursday night. The question is, can we do it?"

"Depends on the type of mine," Webb replied gruffly. "How soon can we have it ahead of the test?"

"I'll insist that he deliver it here at least by afternoon. Will that give you time enough?"

"Sure, it won't take more than a half hour to fix 'er for the test, providing it can be done. But I ain't makin' no promises until I see the mine."

"It's a chance we have to take," Professor Bettenridge said. "The deal would have gone through tonight if it hadn't been for a couple of young newspaper fools who came nosing around here. They may make us trouble Thursday night too."

"I ain't aimin' to get mixed with the police," Webb said uneasily. "If this deal don't go through Thursday night, I'm quitting. We're in a mighty risky business."

"But we stand to make at least $200,000," the professor reminded him. "You'll get a third cut. If Johnson holds off Thursday night, I'll drop to $100,000. The thing we've got to do is to pull off that test okay and clear out."

Penny and Salt had heard enough to be certain that the men with whom they were dealing were crooks of the first rank. Slipping noiselessly away, they trudged to the car.

"Now what do we do?" Penny questioned. "Notify the police?"

"We could," Salt debated, "but so far, it's only our word against Professor Bettenridge's. He'd probably convince the police he was only a crack-pot inventor

who thought he had a wonderful machine. They might let him go."

"Any other ideas?"

"A slick trick would be to fix that mine so it won't explode. That automatically would cause complications and probably delay the deal with Mr. Johnson."

"Just how do you propose to fix Mr. Johnson's mine?" Penny inquired. "It would take some doing."

"The mines are all kept in that shack on the beach?"

"Yes, Louise and I saw Webb working on one of them there. Evidently it was the one the professor exploded tonight."

"He must have doctored it in some special way. Probably an untampered mine won't explode."

"He'll fix Mr. Johnson's mine the same way, and then the test will appear successful."

Salt nodded gloomily. He was lost in thought for several minutes, and then he grinned.

"Maybe I have an idea!"

"What is it, Salt?"

The photographer switched on the car ignition. "Wait until Thursday night," he replied. "Can you get away from the office early?"

"Well, I really shouldn't—"

"I'll take care of that part," Salt said briskly. "Just sit tight, Penny. You and I will have some fun out of this affair yet, and maybe we'll save Mr. Johnson a tidy sum of money."

CHAPTER

17

MAJOR BRYAN

IT WAS nearly midnight by the time Penny reached home. Mrs. Weems had gone to bed, but a light still burned in the study where Mr. Parker was working on a speech he expected to deliver the following day before the Chamber of Commerce.

"Well, I'm glad you finally decided to come home," he remarked severely. "Since my little daughter became Tillie the Toiler, she seems to have developed independent hours."

"Wait until you hear where I've been," Penny said, sinking into an easy chair beside his desk. "Dad, you won't blame me for staying out late when I tell you what I saw and heard."

Eagerly she related all that had occurred, and was pleased to note that the story interested her father.

"Tell me more about Professor Bettenridge," he urged. "Describe him."

"He looks very scholarly, but his language doesn't fit the part," Penny recalled. "He's tall and thin and his nose is very pointed. Middle aged, which might mean forty-five or maybe fifty. That's about all I noticed except that he has a quick way of darting his eyes about. And he wears glasses."

"From your description, he sounds like the same person I heard about this afternoon," Mr. Parker commented.

"Someone told you of his experiments at the lake?"

"Quite the contrary. An Army officer, Major Alfred Bryan called at my office this afternoon, seeking information about a man who may be Professor Bettenridge."

"Was he interested in buying the machine for the Army, Dad?"

Mr. Parker dipped his pen in ink, wrote a few lines, and then looked up again. "No, Major Bryan was sent here to trace a man who has several charges against him. At one time he impersonated an officer and in recent months has been swindling persons by various schemes. He pretends to sell Army or Navy surplus war goods."

"That doesn't sound like Professor Bettenridge, Dad."

"Perhaps not, but from your description it could be the same man. This secret ray machine business sounds phoney to me. Most crooks try more than one

game—the mine exploding trick may be his latest scheme to fleece gullible victims."

"Do you think we should report the professor to the police, Dad?"

"It might be a better idea to send Major Bryan to see him," Mr. Parker returned thoughtfully. "If the professor should prove to be the man he's after, then the Army would take over."

"Where is Major Bryan now, Dad?"

"He didn't mention the name of his hotel, because at the time he called at my office, I had no thought I could assist him in any way. However, he expected to stay in Riverview several days. It shouldn't be so hard to trace him. I'll get busy tomorrow."

Tired from her adventures of the night, Penny soon went to bed. The next day Mr. DeWitt gave her several interesting assignments, and when one of the stories appeared in the final edition of the *Star*, it bore a neat little "By Penny Parker," under the headline.

"Getting on in the world, I see," Elda Hunt observed sarcastically.

Not even the unkind remark could dull Penny's pleasure. She had earned her way on the newspaper by hard, routine work. The by-line meant that she had turned in an excellent well-written story. Elda, whose writing lacked crispness and originality, only once had seen her own name appear in the *Star*. Penny felt a trifle sorry for her.

"There's no fairness around here," Elda complained in a whine. "I've worked over a year. What do I have to show for it? Not even a raise."

Penny did not try to tell the girl it was her own fault, that her attitude toward her work was entirely wrong. Elda must learn for herself.

Not until Wednesday did Penny have a chance to ask her father if he had traced Major Bryan.

"To tell you the truth, the matter slipped my mind," he confessed ruefully. "I've had one conference after another all day long. Tomorrow I'll certainly try to find him."

Penny reminded him of his promise on the following day. Mr. Parker, after telephoning several places, found the major registered at the St. Regis hotel, not far from the Parker home. However, the army officer had left for the day, and was not expected to return before nightfall.

"Oh, dear," fretted Penny, "that may be too late. If Professor Bettenridge is successful in his demonstration tonight, he may rake in Mr. Johnson's money and skip town before the major even sees him."

"It's unlikely the professor will leave without cashing the check, Penny. And banks will not be open until nine o'clock tomorrow."

"I'd feel safer to have police take over," Penny sighed. "If only we could prove charges against Bettenridge!"

"He hasn't swindled anyone yet," her father reminded her. "Learn what you can tonight, and if the sale goes through, we'll then turn him over to the police."

"It may be too late then."

"I think not," smiled her father. "You always were a little impatient, Penny."

Eagerly Penny awaited the arrival of evening and another adventure at Blue Hole Lake. She and Salt arranged to leave the office at four o'clock, hoping to reach the farmhouse early enough to observe what preparations Webb made for exploding Mr. Johnson's mine.

But at three, Salt was sent on an important assignment.

"I'll get back as soon as I can," he promised Penny, pausing beside her desk. "I may be a little late, but we'll still make it."

"I'll be right here waiting," Penny grinned.

At ten minutes past four Salt returned. Thinking he might have pictures to develop before he would be free to leave, Penny did not rush him by going back to the photography room right away. When she had typed her last story of the day and brought it to the editor's desk for inspection, she gathered up her purse and hat.

"Leaving early, aren't you?" Elda inquired in a loud voice so that everyone would notice.

"That's right," Penny replied, without explaining her special mission.

Not wishing to leave the city without ample funds, she first went downstairs to cash a pay check at the company treasurer's window. He gave her the crisp five dollar bills, joking with her about skipping town with so much money.

Penny tucked the bills into her purse and was turning to go back upstairs again, when through the window she saw a man coming down the alley from the rear of the *Star* building. Recognizing him as Mr. McClusky, the deep sea diver she had assisted, she darted to the window and rapped to attract his attention.

Not hearing her, he walked hurriedly on, and was lost in the crowd of the street.

"Wonder what he was doing here?" she thought as she slowly climbed the stairs. "Perhaps he came to see me. But in that case, he probably would have come up the front way."

Dismissing the matter from her mind, she sought Salt in the photography room. The outside gallery was empty, though the photographer's hat and coat hung on a hook by the window.

"Salt!" she called, thinking he must be in the darkroom.

No one answered. Nevertheless, a strange feeling Penny could not have explained, took possession of

her. She sensed a presence somewhere near as if she were being watched.

Nervously Penny stepped to the door of the darkroom. She tapped lightly on it, but there was no answer.

Suddenly fearful, she jerked open the door and groped for a light. As the tiny room blazed with illumination, she uttered a startled gasp.

Almost at her feet, cheek against the floor, lay Salt Sommers.

CHAPTER

18

A SECOND TEST

AS PENNY knelt beside Salt, he stirred slightly and raised a hand to his head. She saw then that there was a tiny break in the skin which also was slightly discolored. Either the photographer had fallen or he had been slugged.

Before she could go for help, he sat up, staring at her in a bewildered manner. Penny assisted him to a chair, and dampening a handkerchief with water from the tap above the developer trays, applied it to his forehead.

"What happened?" she inquired anxiously when Salt seemed able to speak.

"Slugged," he answered in disgust.

"By whom?"

"Don't know. The fellow must have been in the darkroom when I came here to develop my films. Fact is, I thought I heard someone moving around. I

stepped to the door to see, and bing! That's the last I knew."

"Has anything been taken, I wonder?" Switching on another light, Penny glanced over the room. The drawer of a filing cabinet where old films and plates were kept, remained open.

"Someone may have been looking in there!" she commented. "Salt, whoever he is, he must be searching for a film he is afraid we'll publish in the paper."

"Maybe so," Salt agreed, holding a hand to his throbbing forehead. "But I don't know of any picture we have that would damage anyone."

Penny stepped to the doorway of the darkroom. In the larger room, the skylight remained closed. It was impossible to tell if anyone had entered the building in that way.

Some distance down the hall was a seldom-used stairway which led to the roof. Finding a door opening into it, Penny climbed the steps to look about. The rooftop was deserted, but in the building directly across from the *Star*, a corridor window remained open.

"How easy it would be for a man to step out onto the roof from there," she thought. "If the skylight or the stairway door were unlocked, he easily could enter the *Star* photography room without being seen."

Across the way, in the adjoining building, a man stood at an office window, watching Penny curiously.

Sun glared on the panes so his face was distorted. But from the location of the window, she felt certain it was Mr. Cordell.

After a moment, Penny turned and went back down the stairs. The exit at its base was barred by a door with a rusty key in the lock.

Passing through, Penny locked it, and slipped the key into her purse.

"That should stop our prowler for a few days," she thought.

In the photography room again, she checked the skylight, and finding it locked, was convinced that this time the mysterious visitor had entered the building by means of the stairs. She knew the door was usually kept locked, but undoubtedly the janitor had been careless.

By this time Salt was feeling much better. While Penny waited, he explained to the editor why the photos would not be ready until morning, then declared he was ready to start for Blue Hole Lake.

"Do you really feel like going?" Penny asked dubiously.

"Sure thing," the photographer insisted. "It takes more than a little tap on the head to put me out of running."

Salt walked a trifle unsteadily as they went down the back stairs together, but once they were in the press car, he seemed his usual jovial self.

"Now tell me about that plan of yours for tonight," Penny urged as they jounced along the country road.

"It's not much of a plan," the photographer confessed ruefully. "First, we've got to learn exactly what Webb does to those mines to make them explode. Then somehow we'll have to undo the work to cause the demonstration to turn out a flop."

"It sounds like a big order," Penny sighed. "We'll need plenty of luck to carry it out. Especially as we're arriving rather late."

Having no intention of announcing their presence, the pair drew up about a quarter of a mile from the lake, parking in a side road.

Shadows were casting long arms over the ground as they started hurriedly across the fields toward the beach. They had covered two thirds of the distance when Penny suddenly caught Salt's arm, pointing toward the lake.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "There they are now!"

Out on the lake a barge-type boat was being steered toward the beach near the shack where Professor Bettenridge stored the mines. The watching couple recognized three persons aboard the craft, the professor, Mr. Johnson and Webb. The barge also bore a large mine, similar in type to those Penny had seen inside the shack.

"That must be the mine Mr. Johnson is supplying for the test tonight," she whispered.

Hand in hand, Penny and Salt crept closer to the shore. The boat grated on the sand and Webb, with the professor helping him, carried the heavy mine toward the building.

"If the mine is to be exploded tonight, wouldn't it be easier to leave it on the barge ready to drop into the lake?" Penny commented. "Webb and the professor must have a special reason for hauling it ashore."

"I think you have something there," Salt observed. "Obviously, they're going to doctor it in some way. We'll see what happens."

Webb unlocked the door of the shack and the two men carried the mine inside. Creeping still closer to the building, Salt and Penny heard Mr. Johnson say:

"Just a minute. I see you have other mines stored here. How am I to be sure that the one exploded will be the mine I have provided?"

"You may mark it if you wish," the professor replied. "In fact, we prefer that you do, so there can be no possible doubt in your mind. Take this pocket knife and scratch your initials on the covering of the mine. Then tonight, before it is dumped in the lake, you may check again to see there has been no substitution."

"You understand, I don't distrust you," Mr. Johnson said, ill at ease. "But so much money is at stake—"

"I understand your attitude perfectly," the pro-

fessor replied. "Certainly you are entitled to take every precaution."

A silence ensued, and Penny and Salt assumed that Mr. Johnson was scratching his initials on the mine.

"Now suppose we have dinner at the village inn," the professor presently suggested. "Then we will have the demonstration."

"Must we wait so long before setting off the mine?" Mr. Johnson inquired.

"Yes, village authorities gave permission for the test to be held at nine o'clock," the professor explained. "My own preference would be to get it over immediately, but I dare not disobey their orders."

Mr. Johnson made no reply, and a few minutes later, the three men walked away. No sooner had they disappeared up the lake than Penny and Salt came out of hiding from among the trees.

"You have to hand it to Professor Bettenridge," commented the photographer with grudging praise. "He's a smooth talker. I'll bet a frosted cookie the test could be held at one time as well as another so far as the village authorities are concerned. He has a special reason for wanting it at nine o'clock."

"Probably to give Webb time enough to work on the mine or exchange them," Penny said, and then frowned thoughtfully. "But what if the machine actually should work? After all, the professor agreed

to explode Mr. Johnson's mine, and apparently he's marked it with his initials. It won't be easy to substitute another one now."

"All the same, if I'm any good at guessing, it will be done. Now what shall we do until nine o'clock? Grab ourselves something to eat?"

Penny was about to suggest that they drive to a village cafe, when she noticed Webb returning alone from up the beach. Barely did the pair have time to duck out of sight behind a boulder before he approached.

Walking directly to the shack, he unlocked the door, and entered.

"Now this must be where the hocus-pocus begins!" Salt whispered. "We've got to find out what he does to that mine."

"Louise and I climbed up in that tree the other day and looked through the glass in the top."

"Then that's the trick for us! Come on!"

Making no sound, the pair climbed the tree close beside the shack. Noiselessly, they inched their way toward the skylight, and lying flat, peered down into the dark interior.

Webb had lighted a lantern which he hung on a wall nail. Unaware that he was being watched, he squatted in front of the mine which bore Mr. Johnson's initials, studying it thoughtfully.

Muttering to himself, he next took a powerful

ratchet drill, and for a long time worked with it on the mine, boring a tiny but deep hole.

"I'm getting stiff in this position," Penny whispered. "What is he doing, Salt?"

"Don't know," the photographer admitted, puzzled. "Apparently, he's doctoring Mr. Johnson's mine so it will explode tonight, but I'm not smart enough to figure how the trick will be accomplished."

By now it was so dark that the pair in the tree no longer feared they would be seen. Keeping perfectly still, they watched the work in the room below.

"It's clear why Professor Bettenridge set nine o'clock for the demonstration," Salt whispered. "Webb needed all this time to get the mine ready."

"And that's why they brought it here instead of dumping it into the lake," Penny added. "But how can they make the mine explode at exactly the right moment?"

After Webb had worked for a while longer, he arose and stretched his cramped muscles. Going to a cupboard, he removed a white powder from a glass tube, and carefully inserted it in the hole he had just made in the mine. As a final act, he sealed the tiny hole with another material, and polished the surface so that the place did not show.

"Slick work!" Salt commented. "By the time he's through, no one ever could tell the mine has been touched! Certainly not that thick-skulled Johnson."

Apparently satisfied with his work, Webb put away his tools, made a final inspection of the mine, and then left the shack. After carefully locking the door, he disappeared into the night.

"Now what's our move?" Penny asked as she and Salt finally slid down from their uncomfortable perch. "Shall we tell Mr. Johnson what we just saw?"

"We could, but he might not believe us. Penny, I have a better idea! If we can get inside the shack—"

"But it's locked!"

"The skylight may be open." Salt climbed up on the roof to investigate, but to his disappointment, the roof window was tightly fastened from inside.

"We could smash the glass," Penny suggested dubiously.

Salt shook his head. "That would give the whole thing away. No, I think we can get inside another way, but we'll have to work fast! Now that Webb has the mine ready for the demonstration, the professor and Mr. Johnson may show up here at any minute."

CHAPTER

19

THE LANTERN SIGNAL

SALT EXPLAINED that he intended to pick the lock of the shack door.

"When I worked the police beat, a detective taught me this trick," he explained. "You keep watch while I work."

Now that Webb had disappeared no one was to be seen near the beach. To Penny's relief, not a person appeared, and Salt, working swiftly, soon had the door open.

To make certain they would not be taken unawares, Salt relocked the door on the inside. Groping about, he found the lantern Webb had left behind, and lighted it.

Three mines lay on the floor. "Which is the right one?" Penny asked. "They all look alike!"

"Mr. Johnson's initials must be on the one Webb tampered with."

Salt turned over one of the mines, inspecting it.

"That thing might go off any minute," Penny said, edging away. "Do be careful, Salt."

Salt chuckled. "If it should go off, we'd never know what hit us," he said. "This is the one Webb tampered with all right. Penny, how are you at forging?"

"Forging?" she repeated, not understanding what he meant.

"Can you duplicate Mr. Johnson's initials on another mine?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not so it would look the same."

"Sure, you can," Salt said, thrusting his pocket knife into her hand. "It will be dark and no one will look too carefully."

"But why do you want me to do it? You mean to substitute Mr. Johnson's mine for one of the others?"

"That's the ticket," chuckled the photographer. "Maybe my guess is wrong, but I have a sneaking suspicion if we use one of the professor's own mines, it will fail to explode."

"The mine has to be doctored with that powder we saw Webb use!"

"That's my theory, Penny."

"But maybe the other mines have already been treated."

"That's a possibility," Salt admitted thoughtfully.

"No way of telling that, because the hole would be covered so skillfully. We'll have to take a chance on it."

While Salt held the lantern, Penny scratched Mr. Johnson's initials on the metal covering of the mine. Skilled in art, she was able to copy them fairly well.

"They don't look exactly the same," Salt said, comparing the two, "but they're good enough to get by unless Mr. Johnson becomes very critical."

Quickly they moved the two mines, placing Mr. Johnson's well to the back of the room, and leaving the substitute exactly where the other had been.

"Well, that job is done," Salt chuckled. "Unless I miss my guess—"

He broke off, startled to hear a murmur of voices from a short distance down the beach. Quick as a flash he blew out the lantern and hung it in its accustomed place on the wall nail.

"Salt! Those men are coming!" Penny whispered fearfully. "We're trapped here!"

It was too late to slip out the door, for already the men were very close, and unmistakably, one of the voices was that of Professor Bettenridge.

The only available hiding place was a storage closet. Barely in time, Salt and Penny squeezed into it, closing the door and flattening themselves against the wall.

The door of the shack swung open to admit the professor, Webb, and Mr. Johnson.

"Dark as pitch in here," Webb muttered. "Wait and I'll light the lantern."

In a moment the yellow glow illuminated the dingy little room.

"Which is my mine?" Mr. Johnson asked. "They all look alike."

"And for all practical purposes they are exactly alike," said the professor smoothly. "So far as my machine is concerned, it makes not a partical of difference. Webb, which is the mine that Mr. Johnson supplied?"

"Here it is," the assistant said, tapping the one Salt and Penny had substituted. "See your initials, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, yes," agreed the man.

Inside the closet, Penny and Salt breathed easier.

"Let's get on with the demonstration," the professor urged with sudden impatience. "Load the mine onto the boat, Webb. Go out to the center of the lake. Then when you have dropped it, give the usual signal."

"When everything is okay, I'll wave my lantern three times," Webb agreed.

The mine was trundled out and the shack became dark. However, Salt and Penny did not dare come out of hiding until they heard Webb start the motor of the boat.

"The coast is clear," the photographer then re-

ported, peering out a crack of the outer door. "Webb has gone, and the professor and Mr. Johnson are walking up to the cabin."

From the beach, Penny and Salt watched the boat moving slowly across the water. Presently the craft stopped, and the mine was heaved overboard. The pair waited, but there was no signal from Webb. Nor did his boat move away from the locality where the mine had been dropped.

"Why doesn't he wave the lantern?" Penny fretted.

"He's waiting deliberately, and for a purpose," Salt declared. "Why not amble up the hill and watch the professor perform?"

"Not a bad idea," agreed Penny.

Walking rapidly, they arrived at the cabin quite breathless. As they tapped lightly on the door, Professor Bettenridge appeared visibly startled. He stiffened to alert, guarded attention, but relaxed slightly as his wife admitted the pair.

"Oh, it's you two again," he said none too pleasantly. "You are just in time to witness my final demonstration. We are waiting now for my assistant's signal."

"It seems to take a long while," Mr. Johnson commented, glancing at his watch.

"Webb may have had trouble getting the mine overboard," the professor soothed. "Besides, he has to move out of the danger zone."

Penny and Salt looked at each other but said nothing. They were certain that Webb had been in no haste to return to shore.

"What are you two smirking about?" the professor demanded irritably. "I suppose you think my machine won't work?"

"I'll be surprised if it does," Salt agreed, unruffled.

Mrs. Bettenridge, who stood at the window, suddenly cried: "There is the signal!"

Professor Bettenridge snapped on a switch and the ray machine began to hum. He turned on another motor and lights began to glow. Then he struck the crystal ball, producing a musical vibration.

Assuming a confident pose, he waited.

Nothing happened.

As the seconds ticked by and still there was no explosion, the professor began to wilt. He gazed desperately at his wife who looked as dismayed as he.

"My dear, something seems to be wrong. Are you sure you saw the signal? Perhaps Webb has not yet dropped the mine."

"I saw the signal. The lantern was waved three times."

The professor made several adjustments on his machine, and again struck the musical note. But there was no explosion. Enjoying his discomfiture, Salt and Penny grinned from ear to ear.

"You did something to the machine!" the professor

accused them furiously. "You came here and tampered!"

"We've not been near this place tonight until a moment ago," Penny retorted. "The truth is, you weren't able to explode Mr. Johnson's mine!"

"That's not so!" The professor's face now was red with anger. "Something has gone wrong, but that doesn't prove my machine is a failure. We'll have another test."

"I'm not sure that I shall be interested," Mr. Johnson said quietly. "I've been thinking the matter over and there are so many hazards—"

"I'll make you an especially good offer," the professor declared, flipping the canvas cover over his machine. "Furthermore, we will have the test tonight. I guarantee to explode the mine before you leave here."

"But the mine I supplied is at the bottom of the lake and it failed to go off," Mr. Johnson said.

"First, we will talk to Webb and learn exactly what happened," the professor said, taking him by the arm. "I know there is a logical explanation for the failure."

Glaring at Penny and Salt, he shooed everyone out of the cabin, locking the door.

"My dear," he said to his wife, giving her a significant look, "take Mr. Johnson to the house while I find Webb. I'll be with you in just a minute."

The professor went hurriedly down the beach while

Mrs. Bettenridge and Mr. Johnson walked slowly toward the rooming house. Penny and Salt remained beside the cabin until everyone was beyond hearing.

"Well, our trick worked," Salt chuckled, "but if we aren't careful, the professor will pull off a successful test yet and ruin all our plans."

"He and Webb are certain to examine the mines and discover the one with Mr. Johnson's initials still in the shack. Then they may convince Mr. Johnson there was a mix-up, and go ahead with another test which will be successful."

"We've got to do something," Salt muttered. "But what?"

"I know!" Penny exclaimed. "I'll telephone Dad and have him come here right away with Major Bryan!"

"Good!" approved Salt. "I'll stay here and hold the fort while you telephone. Tell your father to step on the gas, because we've got to move fast to queer Professor Bettenridge's game."

CHAPTER

20

A CROOK EXPOSED

EAGER TO carry out Salt Sommers' bidding, Penny ran up the hill in search of a telephone. She considered using the one at the house where Professor and Mrs. Bettenridge roomed, but decided against it, fearing that the conversation might be overheard or reported to them by the farm woman.

Hastening on, she saw a light farther down the road, and recalled having noticed a house there. Five minutes later, completely winded, she pounded on the door. A man in shirtsleeves, the evening newspaper in his hand, answered her knock.

"Please, may I use your telephone?" Penny gasped.

"Why, sure," he agreed, stepping aside for her to enter. "Anything wrong?"

Penny knew better than to mention what was happening at the lake. "I want to telephone my father in Riverview," she explained.

"The phone is in the other room," the man said, switching on a light.

Placing the call, Penny waited impatiently for it to be put through. She was uncertain whether her father would be at home. If she failed to reach him, then the only other thing was to notify the sheriff.

"Here is your party. Go ahead, please," came the long distance operator's voice. The next moment Penny heard her father's clear tones at the other end of the line.

"Dad, I'm at Blue Hole Lake with Salt," she explained hurriedly. "Can you drive here right away?"

"I suppose so," he answered, knowing from her voice that something serious was wrong. "What's up?"

"We've learned plenty about Professor Bettenridge, Dad. Unless something is done quickly, he may sell his fake machine to Mr. Johnson."

"But what can *I* do about it?" the publisher asked.

"Can you get hold of the Major and bring him with you?" Penny pleaded. "Professor Bettenridge may be the man he's after!"

"Maybe I can reach him!" Mr. Parker agreed. "If I have luck I'll be out there within twenty or thirty minutes. I'll come as fast as I can."

Before hanging up the receiver, Penny gave her father detailed instructions for reaching the lake and told him where to park. Leaving a dollar bill to pay for the call, she then hastened back to find Salt.

The photographer was nowhere near the cabin and

she was afraid to call his name lest she be overheard by the Bettenridges.

As she stood in the shadow of the building, she heard voices from the beach. Someone with a lighted lantern was coming up the trail, and soon she distinguished two figures—Professor Bettenridge and Webb.

"That's the story you'll have to tell Johnson," she heard the professor say. "Tell him that somehow you got the two mines mixed up as you were loading them onto the boat and dumped one that was never meant to explode."

"But he saw us load the mine."

"It was dark and he may not be sure. Anyway, the mine with Johnson's initials is still in the shack. We'll show it to him."

"What bothers me is how did the mistake happen?" Webb muttered. "I know the mine I loaded on the boat had Johnson's initials. It should have gone off."

"Someone is onto our game, and tampered with the mines. It may have been a trick of that newspaper pair."

"In that case, we're in a dangerous spot. We ought to clear out while the clearing is good. If the authorities get onto what we're doing—"

"They won't—at least not tonight," the professor said confidently. "The sheriff is as dumb as they come, and is convinced I am a genius second only to Thomas Edison. We'll have to pull off a successful

test tonight with Johnson's mine, collect what we can, and clear out."

"Okay," Webb agreed, "but this is my last job. The game is too dangerous. I served one stretch in the pen and I don't look forward to another."

"If we can explode Johnson's mine tonight, we'll collect the money and be away from here as soon as we cash the check. Can you pull off the job without any blunder?"

"Sure I can unless someone tampers with the mine! This time I'll make sure they don't!"

"Okay," the professor agreed. "Now I want you to talk to Johnson. Put up a good story, and get him to look at the mine that has his initials on it. If he refuses, we're licked, but it's worth a final try."

"I'd like to find the guy who broke into the shack!" Webb muttered.

"We may have time for that later. Just now our most important job is to convince Johnson we have something to sell."

The two men now were very close. Penny flattened herself against the building wall, fearful of being seen. The light from their lantern illuminated her for an instant, but the men were so absorbed in their discussion, they failed to see her. Going on up the hillside path, they vanished into the farmhouse.

What had become of Salt, Penny did not know. Thinking he might have gone down to the lake, she

walked rapidly in that direction. As she approached the shack where the mines were stored, she heard a low whistle.

"Is that you, Salt?" she called softly.

He came from behind a clump of bushes to join her. Quickly they compared notes. Salt had overheard no conversation, but he had watched Professor Bettenridge and Webb as they reexamined the mines in the shack.

"They're onto our game, and it won't work twice," he said. "We've got to delay the test, but how?"

"Maybe we could cut the boat loose!"

"A capital idea!" Salt approved, chuckling. "Penny, you really have a brain!"

As they scurried over the stones to the water's edge, Penny suddenly stopped short.

"Listen!" she commanded.

"I didn't hear anything," Salt said.

"An automobile stopped by the roadside. I'm sure of it. Maybe it's my father!"

"He couldn't have reached here so soon."

"You don't know Dad," Penny chuckled. "He drives like the wind. It certainly sounded like the engine of our car."

"Let's have a look before we cut the boat loose," Salt said, slipping a knife back into his pocket.

"I'll go," Penny offered. "You wait here."

Before Salt could stop her, she darted away into the

darkness. Crawling under a barbed wire fence, she took a short cut to the road. Even before she saw the car, she heard a voice which she recognized as her father's.

"Dad!" she called softly.

He was with another man whom Penny hoped was Major Bryan. As the two came toward the fence, she saw that it was indeed the Army officer.

"Dad, how did you get here so quickly?" she greeted him. "Salt and I didn't expect you for at least another twenty minutes."

"I was lucky enough to get hold of Major Bryan right away," Mr. Parker answered, climbing over the fence. "Now I hope you haven't brought us on a wild chase, Penny. What's up?"

"Come with me and I'll show you," she offered. "That's easier than explaining everything."

Major Bryan, a well-built man of early middle age, asked Penny several questions about Professor Bettenridge as the three walked hurriedly toward the lake.

"From your description, he seems to be the man I'm after," he declared grimly. "If he's the same person, his real name is Claude Arkwright and he's wanted for impersonating an officer and on various other charges. He pulled a big job in New York three months ago, then vanished."

Salt was waiting at the lake. "What's our move?"

he asked, after relating everything that had occurred that night. "Shall we cut the boat loose?"

"First, let me examine those mines," the major requested. "Can we get into the shack?"

"I can pick the lock, but it takes time," Salt offered.

"We'll break it," the major decided. "Those men may return here at any minute, so there's no time to lose."

The door was forced open and Penny was placed on guard to watch the hillside for Webb or anyone in the professor's party.

There was no light in the shack, but both Mr. Parker and the major had brought flashlights. Salt pointed out the mine which had been doctored by Webb. Carefully, the Army officer examined it.

"I can't tell much by looking at it for the work has been cleverly concealed," he admitted. "But from what you've told me, I am quite certain how the mine is made to explode."

"How is it done?" Salt demanded.

"After the hole is made, a chemical—probably sodium—is inserted. Then another substance which melts slowly in water is used to seal up the opening."

"Then that explains why Webb delayed so long in giving the signal after the mine had been dropped into the water!" Penny exclaimed from the doorway. "He was waiting for the substance to melt!"

"Exactly," agreed the major. "If my theory is correct, only the action of water is required to explode this mine. The professor's machine, of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with it."

"Why don't we explode the mine now?" Penny suddenly proposed. "That would put an end to the professor's little scheme."

"It might also prevent us from arresting him," the major said. He debated a moment. Then he exclaimed: "It's worth trying! We'll load the mine on the boat and dump 'er in the lake!"

The men would not permit Penny to help with the dangerous work. Carefully they transported the mine to the boat. Salt was about to start the motor, but the major stopped him.

"No, we don't want the sound of the engine to give us away," he said. "We'll row out into the lake."

Penny was eager to accompany the men, but they would not hear of it. To her disappointment, she was compelled to remain on the beach.

Sitting down on the sand, she nervously watched until the boat faded into the black of the night. Presently, she heard a splash which told her that the mine had been lowered overboard. Anxiously, she waited for the boat to return.

"Why don't they come?" she thought, straining to hear the sound of oars. "If the explosion should go off while they're still out there—"

Then she heard the boat coming and breathed in relief. Soon the craft grated on sand, and the three men leaped out.

"Perhaps my theory is wrong," the major commented, as they all huddled together, waiting. "The mine should have gone off by this time."

Several minutes elapsed and still nothing happened. And then, as the group became convinced their plan had failed, there came a terrific explosion which sent flame and water high above the lake's surface.

CHAPTER

21

IN SEARCH OF WEBB

"BEAUTIFUL! BEAUTIFUL!" chuckled the major as the flames began to die away. "That proves our theory. No machine is required to set off the mines—only the action of water."

"Professor Bettenridge must have heard the explosion!" Penny exclaimed, fairly beside herself with excitement. "What will happen now?"

"If human nature runs true to form, he will soon come here to investigate," the major predicted.

The four stepped back into the dense growth of trees to wait. Within five minutes they observed two shadowy figures scurrying down the path toward the shack where the mines were stored. As they came closer, Penny recognized the professor and his wife.

"And someone is following them," she discerned. "It looks like Mr. Johnson."

Professor Bettenridge and his wife now were near

the trees. Their voices, though low, carried to those in hiding.

"That stupid lout, Webb!" the professor muttered. "He has ruined everything now by setting off the mine too soon."

"But how could it have been Webb?" his wife protested. "He was at the farmhouse only five minutes ago. He wouldn't have had time."

"Then it was someone else—" Professor Bettenridge paused, and cast a quick alert glance about the lake shore. He noted that the boat was tied, but that the door of the shack was wide open.

"We've been exposed!" he muttered. "Our game is up, and we've got to get away from here before the authorities arrest us."

"But what about Johnson?" his wife demanded, glancing over her shoulder at the man who was following them down the hillside path.

"We can do nothing now. He had begun to catch on even before tonight, and this explosion finishes everything. Don't even stop to pack your clothes. We'll get our car and clear out."

"Webb?"

"He'll have to look out for himself. We're traveling alone and traveling fast."

Those in hiding suddenly stepped forth from the trees, blocking the path. Major Bryan moved directly in front of the professor, flashing a light into his face.

"Good evening, Claude Arkwright," he said distinctly.

The professor was startled, but recovered poise quickly. "You are mistaken," he said in a cold voice. "My name is Bettenridge."

"No doubt that is what you call yourself now. You are wanted by the Federal government for impersonating an officer."

"Ridiculous!"

"May I see your draft card?" the major requested curtly.

"Sorry, I haven't it with me. It is in my room."

"Then we will go there."

Nettled, Professor Bettenridge could think of no further excuse. Glancing significantly at his wife, he said: "My dear, will you go to the house and get the card for our inquisitors?"

"We will all go," corrected the major. "Your wife may be wanted as your accomplice in this latest secret ray machine fleece. We prefer that she does not escape."

"You are very trusting," sneered the professor.

By this time, Mr. Johnson had reached the hillside. Puffing from having hurried so fast, he gazed in bewilderment at the little group.

"What does this mean?" he inquired. "What caused the mine to explode?"

"It was set off by being dropped in the lake," explained the major.

"You mean the explosion was not touched off by Professor Bettenridge's invention?"

"The machine had nothing whatsoever to do with it," Penny explained. "Professor Bettenridge and his accomplice, Webb Nelson, have been doctoring the mines with a powder and an outer shield which dissolves in water. They hoped to sell the worthless machine to you before you discovered the truth."

The information stunned Mr. Johnson, but recovering, he turned furiously upon Professor Bettenridge.

"You cheap trickster!" he shouted. "I'll have you arrested for this!"

"Have you given the man any money?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"A thousand dollars for an option on the machine. The rest was to have been paid tonight."

"You're lucky to get off so easily," Mr. Parker said. "It's possible too, that we can get part of your deposit back."

"You can't hold me on any trumped-up charge," Professor Bettenridge said angrily. "You have no warrant."

He started away, but was brought up short as he felt the major's revolver pressing against his ribs.

"This will hold you, I think," said the Army man

coolly. "Now lead the way up the hill to the other cabin. I want to see your remarkable invention."

With his wife clinging to his arm, the professor marched stiffly ahead of the group. He unlocked the cabin door and all went inside.

Jerking off the canvas which covered the secret ray machine, Major Bryan inspected it briefly.

"A worthless contraption!" he said contemptuously. "Utterly useless!"

"Where did you meet Webb Nelson?" Penny asked the professor. "And where is he now?"

"You'll have to find him for yourself," sneered the professor. "If he has the sense I think, he's probably miles away from here by now."

Determined that the man should not escape, Penny, Salt and Mr. Parker started for the farmhouse, leaving the major and Mr. Johnson to question the professor. As they rapped on the screen door, Mrs. Leonard came to let them in.

"What is going on here tonight, may I ask?" she demanded irritably. "People banging in and out of the house at all hours! Explosions! I declare, I wish I never had rented a room to that crazy professor and his wife!"

"Is Webb Nelson here?" Mr. Parker asked.

"The professor's helper? Why, no, right after the explosion he came, gathered a bag of things from the professor's room, and went off down the road."

"In a car?"

"He was afoot when he left here. Is anything wrong?"

"Considerable. Professor Bettenridge has just been exposed as an impostor. Webb must have realized the jig was up when he heard the mine go off."

"The professor an impostor!" Mrs. Leonard exclaimed. "Well, of all things!"

"Which way did Webb go?" Mr. Parker asked.

"Down the road toward town when I last saw him."

"Maybe we can catch him!" Mr. Parker cried.

"If he didn't get a lift," Salt added.

All piled into the Parker car which had been left a short distance down the road. But in the drive to Newhall, the man was not sighted. Nor did inquiry in the town reveal anyone who had seen him.

"Undoubtedly he expected to be followed, and cut across the fields or took a side road," Mr. Parker declared. "We'll have to depend upon the authorities to pick him up now."

Stopping at the sheriff's office, warrants for the man's arrest were sworn out, and the party then returned to Mrs. Leonard's. Professor Bettenridge and his wife had been brought to the farmhouse by Major Bryan who proposed to hold them there pending the arrival of federal authorities from Riverview.

"There's one thing I want to know," Penny whispered to her father. "How did Professor Bettenridge

meet Webb? Perhaps he can explain the man's connection with the *Snark*."

The question was put to the professor who replied briefly that he knew nothing whatsoever about Webb Nelson.

"I met him only two weeks ago," he said. "He claimed to be an expert at handling explosives, so I hired him."

No one believed the professor was telling the truth. However, it was useless to question him further. Determined not to implicate himself, his wife, or his helper, he spoke as seldom as possible.

"The man has a room here," Mr. Parker suggested. "Suppose we see what we can find."

Mrs. Leonard led the way upstairs. The professor's room was locked, but she opened it with a master key.

Two suitcases had been packed as if for a hasty departure and everything was in disorder. All garments had been removed from the closets. The scrap basket was filled with torn letters which Mr. Parker promptly gathered together and placed in an envelope for future piecing together.

In one of the suitcases he found several newspaper clippings. One bore a picture of the professor, but the name beneath it was Claude Arkwright, and the story related that he was wanted in connection with a $10,000 hoax.

"Bettenridge is our man all right," the publisher declared. "We made no mistake in holding him for the sheriff."

Penny had been searching the larger of the two suitcases which seemed to contain only clothing. But as she reached the lower layer, she suddenly gave a jubilant cry.

"Salt! Dad!" she exclaimed. "It's here! See what I've found!"

CHAPTER

22

SALT'S MISSING CAMERA

FROM THE suitcase, Penny lifted Salt's camera. With a cry of pleasure, he snatched it from her hand and eagerly examined it.

"Is it damaged in any way?" Penny asked.

"It doesn't seem to be. So the professor had it all the time just as we thought!"

"And here are the plates I tossed into the car the night of the explosion!" Penny added, burrowing deeper into the pile of clothing. "They're probably ruined by now."

"Maybe not," said Salt, examining them. "The professor may have thought they were unexposed plates and kept them for use later on."

"Anyway, it was crooked of him to try to keep the camera," Penny declared. "Though I suppose such a small theft doesn't amount to much in comparison to the trick he nearly played on Mr. Johnson."

"It matters to me," the photographer chuckled. "Am

I glad to get this camera back! The plates won't do us any good now they are outdated, but I'll take them along anyhow. I'm curious to see if they would have shown anything of significance."

"By all means develop them," urged Mr. Parker. "Anything else in the suitcase?"

In a pocket of the case Penny found several letters from Mr. Johnson which she gave to her father. Knowing they would be valuable in establishing a case of attempted fraud against the professor, he kept them.

"I wish Webb Nelson hadn't managed to escape," Penny remarked as the trio went downstairs again. "He must have started for Newhall, perhaps to catch a train."

"Any due at this time?" her father asked thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't know."

"Tell you what," Mr. Parker proposed. "We can do nothing more here. We may as well drive to the village again and press an inquiry for Webb."

Once more the car with Salt as driver careened over the bumpy country road to Newhall. They reached the town without sighting anyone who resembled the professor's helper.

"Drive to the station," Mr. Parker instructed Salt. "There's an outside chance Webb went there."

The depot was a drab little red building, deserted except for a sleepy-eyed station agent who told them

there was no passenger train scheduled to leave Newhall before six o'clock the next morning.

"Any freight trains?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"A couple are overdue," the agent said. "No. 32 from the east, and No. 20, also westbound. No. 20's just coming into the block."

Although it seemed unlikely Webb would take a freight train out of town, Mr. Parker, Salt and Penny, decided to wait for it to come in. They went outside, standing in the shadow of the station.

"No sign of anyone around," Salt declared, looking carefully about. "We may as well go back to the lake."

"Let's wait," Penny urged.

No. 20 rumbled into the station, stirring up a whirlwind of dust and cinders. A trainman with a lantern over his arm, came into the station to get his orders from the agent. He chatted a moment, then went out again, swinging aboard one of the cars. A moment later, the train began to move.

"Shall we go?" Mr. Parker said impatiently.

Penny buttoned her coat as she stepped beyond the protection of the building, for the night air was cold and penetrated her thin clothing. Treading along behind her father and Salt to the car, she started to climb in, when her attention riveted upon a lone figure some distance from the railroad station. A man, who re-

sembled Webb Nelson in build, had emerged from behind a tool shed, and stood close to the tracks watching the slowly moving freight.

Then he ran along beside the train and suddenly leaped into one of the empty box cars.

"Dad! Salt!" she exclaimed. "I just saw someone leap into one of those cars! I'm sure it was Webb!"

"Where?" demanded her father. "Which car?"

"The yellow one. Oh, he'll get away unless we can have him arrested at the next town!"

"He won't escape if I can stop him!" Salt muttered.

Racing across the platform, he waited for the car Penny had indicated. Although the train was moving faster now, he leaped and swung himself to a sitting position in the open doorway.

"Look out! Look out!" Penny screamed in warning.

Behind Salt, the man who had taken refuge in the car, moved stealthily toward him, obviously intending to push him off the train. But the photographer knew what to expect and was prepared.

He whirled suddenly and scrambled to his feet. His attacker caught him slightly off balance, and they went down together, rolling over and over on the straw littered floor.

Worried for Salt, Penny and Mr. Parker ran along beside the train. The publisher tried to leap aboard

to help the photographer, but lacking the younger man's athletic prowess, he could not make it. Already winded, he began to fall behind.

Penny kept on and managed to grasp the doorway of the car, but she instantly realized she could not swing herself through the opening. The train now was moving rapidly and gaining speed each moment.

Inside the box car, the two men were rolling over and over, each fighting desperately to gain the advantage. Penny could not see what was happening. Forced by the speed of the train, she let go her hold. Her feet were swept from beneath her, and she stumbled and fell along the right of way.

Before she could scramble to her feet, her father had caught up with her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

Penny's knees were skinned but the injury was so trifling she did not speak of it. Her one concern was for Salt.

"Oh, Dad," she said, grasping his arm nervously. "What are we going to do? That brute may kill him!"

Mr. Parker shared Penny's concern, but he said calmly: "There's only one thing we can do now. We'll have the station agent send a wire to the next station. Police will meet the train and take Webb into custody."

"He may not be on the train by the time it reaches

the next town! Oh, Dad, Salt may be half killed before then!"

Penny and her father stared after the departing freight. The engineer whistled for a high trestle spanning a narrow river, and the train began to rumble over it.

Suddenly Penny stiffened into alert attention. In the doorway of the open boxcar, she could see the two struggling men. Mr. Parker, too, became tense.

As they watched fearfully, one of the men was pushed from the car. He rolled over and over down a steep embankment toward the creek bed.

The other man, poised in the doorway an instant, then just before the car reached the trestle, leaped.

CHAPTER

23

ESCAPE BY NIGHT

FEARFUL FOR Salt, Penny and her father ran down the tracks toward the railroad trestle. Scrambling and sliding down the slippery embankment, they saw Salt lying in a heap near the edge of the creek.

Webb, his ankle injured, was trying to hobble toward a corn field just beyond the railroad right of way.

"Get him! Don't let him escape!" Salt cried, raising himself to his knees.

Although alarmed for the photographer who appeared to have been injured by his leap, Penny and her father pursued Webb. Handicapped as he was with an injured ankle, they overtook him by the barbed wire fence.

Already badly battered from the fight, and bruised as a result of his fall from the train, the man put up only a brief struggle as Mr. Parker pinned him to the ground.

"Quick!" the publisher directed Penny. "See what you can do for Salt. He may be badly injured."

The photographer, however, had struggled to his feet. He stood unsteadily, staring down at his torn clothing.

"Are you all right?" Penny asked anxiously, running to his side.

"Yes, I'm okay," he said, gingerly touching a bruised jaw. "Boy! Is that lad a scrapper? Did you see me push him out of the boxcar?"

"We certainly did, and we were frightened half to death! We thought you would be killed."

Hobbling over to the fence, Salt confronted his assailant. Webb's face was a sorry sight. His nose was crimson, both eyes were blackened and his lip was bleeding.

"You may as well come along without making any more trouble," Mr. Parker told him grimly. "Professor Bettenridge has been taken into custody, and the entire fraud has been exposed."

"I figured that out when I heard the mine go off," the man returned sullenly. "Okay, you got me, but I was only carrying out orders. I worked for Professor Bettenridge, but any deals he made were his business, not mine."

"That remains to be seen," replied Mr. Parker. "We'll let you talk to the sheriff. Move along, and no monkey business."

Having no weapon, Salt and the publisher walked on either side of the prisoner, while Penny brought up the rear.

"You don't need to hang onto me," he complained bitterly. "I ain't going to try to escape."

"We're sure you won't," returned Salt, "because we'll be watching you every step of the way."

At first, as the four tramped down the tracks toward the station, the prisoner showed no disposition to talk. But gradually his curiosity gained the better of him. He sought information about Professor Bettenridge's arrest, and then tried to build up a story that would convince his captors he had only been an employee hired on a weekly basis.

"I suppose you know nothing about the *Snark* either," Penny observed bitterly. "After Ben Bartell and I pulled you out of the river, you repaid us by stealing his watch."

To her astonishment, the man reached in his pocket and gave her the timepiece.

"Here," he said gruffly, "give it back to him. I won't need it where I'm going."

"Why did you take the watch when it didn't belong to you?" Penny pursued the subject. "Especially after Ben risked his life to pull you out of the river."

"Oh, I don't know," the man answered impatiently. "I needed a watch, so I took it. Quit askin' so many questions."

"Why were you pushed off the *Snark?*" Penny demanded, refusing to abandon the subject.

She did not expect Webb to answer the question as he had refused to explain at the time of his rescue. To her surprise, he replied grimly:

"They tried to get rid of me. We had a disagreement over a job they wanted me to pull."

"What job was that?" Mr. Parker interposed.

"Dynamiting the Conway Steel Plant."

The words produced a powerful effect upon the publisher, Salt, and Penny. At their stunned silence, Webb added hastily:

"You understand, I didn't do it. They got sore because I refused to pull the job."

"Why, that doesn't make sense," Penny protested. "Evidently, you are mixed up on your dates, because the Conway Plant explosion took place before the night we rescued you from the water."

"Sure, I know," the man muttered, trying to cover his slip of tongue. "They were afraid I'd squawk to the police and that was why they pitched me overboard."

"Who pulled the job?" Salt asked.

"I don't know. Someone was hired to set off the explosion."

Webb's story was accepted but not believed. Penny knew from previous experience that the man was more inclined to tell a lie than the truth. Con-

vinced that he might have been implicated in the explosion, she suddenly recalled his visit to the office of Jason Cordell. Could his call there have any hidden significance?

"You're a friend of Mr. Cordell's, aren't you?" she inquired abruptly.

The question caught Webb off guard. He gave her a quick look but answered in an indifferent way: "Never heard of him."

"I'm certain I saw you in his office," Penny insisted.

Realizing that his loose talk was building up trouble for himself, Webb would say no more. At the sheriff's office, he repeated practically the same story, insisting that he had been hired by Professor Bettenridge on a wage basis, and that he was in no way implicated in the plot to defraud Mr. Johnson.

"Your story doesn't hang together," Mr. Parker said severely. "Naturally you knew that the professor's machine was worthless?"

"Not at first," Webb whined. "He only told me he wanted a mine exploded at a certain time. It was only by chance that I learned he intended to cheat Mr. Johnson."

"Considering the conversations I overheard between you and the professor, that is a little hard to believe," Penny contributed.

"It might go a little easier with you, if you come through with the truth," a deputy sheriff in charge of

the office, added. "Anything you want to say before we lock you up?"

Webb hesitated a long while, and then in a subdued voice said: "Okay, I may as well tell you. Sure, I knew the professor and his wife were crooks. They offered me a split on the profits if Johnson bought the secret ray machine."

"Where did you obtain your mines?" Salt asked curiously.

"I don't know," Webb answered, and for once spoke the truth. "Professor Bettenridge had a friend hooked up in a munitions plant who supplied him with a few which were defective."

"Now tell us the truth about the *Snark*," Penny insisted. "You said those men were mixed up in the dynamiting of the Conway Steel Plant. Was that one of the professor's jobs?"

"No, he had nothing to do with it."

"His car was in the vicinity of the plant on the night of the explosion."

"It was just accident then," Webb maintained. "He had nothing to do with it."

"Then you do know the persons involved?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Webb said sullenly. "Why not go to the *Snark* and get information first hand if you want it."

It was evident the man would reveal no more, so the deputy sheriff locked him up. Within a few

minutes Professor Bettenridge and his wife were brought in, and although they indignantly demanded release, they too were placed in jail cells.

Mr. Johnson who had accompanied Major Bryan to the sheriff's office, seemed rather stunned by the events which had transpired. He shook Penny's hand and could not praise her enough for exposing the professor's trickery.

"What a fool I was," he acknowledged. "His smooth talk hypnotized me. Why, I might have paid a large sum of money to him, if it hadn't been for you. Now I shall prosecute charges vigorously."

The wealthy man tried to press money upon both Penny and Salt, who smilingly refused to accept it. They assured him that knowing the professor's trick had failed was ample reward.

By the time Penny, her father and Salt finally reached the Parker home it was nearly midnight. Somewhat to their surprise, Mrs. Weems was still waiting up.

"I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed, before they could explain what had happened. "Nearly an hour ago someone telephoned, asking for Penny. I think the message may be important."

"Who was it?" Penny asked.

"A man named Edward McClusky."

"The river diver!" Penny exclaimed. "What did he want, Mrs. Weems?"

"At first he wouldn't tell me, saying he had to talk to you personally. However, I finally persuaded him to trust me with the message. He said: 'Tell Miss Parker that her friend Ben Bartell went aboard the *Snark* last night and hasn't been seen since.' "

CHAPTER

24

A RAID ON THE SNARK

"OH, WHY didn't Mr. McClusky call the police instead?" Penny cried anxiously. "Ben may be in serious trouble!" Turning to her father she added: "Dad, we must go there right away!"

"To the *Snark?*" Mr. Parker frowned and reached for the telephone. "The matter is one for the police, Penny. I'll call the night inspector."

Contacting the police station, the publisher explained why he believed it advisable to search the *Snark*. He was assured that a squad would be sent there at once to investigate.

"We've had other complaints about that vessel," the inspector said. "So far we've not been able to find anything out of the way."

Having notified the police, Mr. Parker felt that his duty was done, but not Penny.

"Dad, can't we go there too?" she pleaded. "Ben is in trouble and we may be able to help him."

"I don't see what we could do, Penny. Besides, you know how I feel about Ben."

"And you're dead wrong. You've done him a dreadful injustice. Tonight may prove it."

Mr. Parker wavered, then suddenly gave in. "All right, get your heavy coat," he instructed. "It will be cold along the waterfront."

Penny raced for the warm garment and joined her father and Salt as they were backing the press car out of the driveway.

"The *Snark* is tied up at Pier 23," Penny directed. "Straight down this street and turn at Jackson."

The car reached the docks, parking alongside a dark warehouse. There was no sign of the police. A short distance away, the *Snark* with only dim deck lights showing, and no one in view, tugged at her heavy ropes.

"We'll wait for the police," Mr. Parker decided.

Within five minutes, two cars glided noiselessly up to the pier and a dozen men in uniform leaped out. Captain Bricker, in charge of the squad, strode to the *Snark* and called loudly: "Ahoy, there!"

No one answered.

"Ahoy, the *Snark!*" he shouted again.

Still receiving no answer, he ordered his men aboard. Single file, they crawled cautiously up a ladder to the dark deck.

"Anyone aboard?" the captain called once more.

Salt, Mr. Parker and Penny, eager for first hand information, followed the policemen up the ladder.

"My men will search the vessel," Captain Bricker told them, "but no one appears to be aboard. Everything seems in order."

Spreading out over the ship, the policemen returned one by one to report they could find nothing amiss. Not even a watchman was aboard.

"This seems to be a wild-goose chase, Captain," Mr. Parker apologized. "Sorry to have bothered you. We considered our information reliable."

The policemen began to leave. Penny, lingering on deck until the last, was being helped onto the ladder by Captain Bricker, when they both heard a sound below decks.

"What was that?" the officer muttered, listening alertly.

"It sounded like someone thumping on a wall," Penny cried. "There it is again!"

The noise was not repeated a third time, but Captain Bricker had heard enough to make him believe that someone remained below. Drawing his revolver, and warning Penny to keep back, he started down the dark companionway.

At a safe distance, Penny trailed him. His bright flashlight beam cut paths of light over the walls as he tried the doors.

"Anyone here?" he shouted.

A thumping noise came from a room on the right. Guided by the sound, Captain Bricker tried the door. It was locked.

A powerfully built man, the officer hurled his weight against the door, and the lock gave way. Keeping back, lest he become a target for a bullet, he kicked the door open. The room was empty! But, the flashlight beam caught the outline of a trapdoor in the floor. The officer flung it open. Below, in the hold, lay a man gagged and bound hand and foot.

Following the police officer into the room, Penny uttered a little cry as she recognized Ben Bartell. Blinking owlishly in the light which had been focused upon him, he was a deplorable sight. His face was bruised, his hair matted with blood, and one eye was swollen almost shut.

"Oh, Ben! What have they done to you?" Penny gasped in horror.

Captain Bricker cut the young man free, and pulled the gag from his mouth. He helped Ben into a chair and then went to another cabin for water.

"Who did this to you?" Penny asked, rubbing the reporter's hands to restore circulation.

He seemed too exhausted to reply so she did not urge him to speak. The captain brought water which Ben drank thirstily.

"He's evidently been tied up several hours," the officer commented.

"Since last night," Ben whispered, moistening his cracked lips.

"How did you get aboard?"

"I sneaked on when no one was looking—wanted to see what I could learn."

"Who were the men that tied you up?"

"Don't know. But before they caught me, I heard plenty. The men on this boat are mixed up in the dynamiting of the Conway Steel Plant."

Penny nodded, for this information correlated with what she already had learned.

"Was Webb Nelson involved in the plot?" she asked eagerly.

"He set off the dynamite according to what I overheard last night," Ben revealed. "But he got into a fight with the gang over his pay for the job. He tried to shake them down for a big sum, threatening to spill everything to the police if they didn't cough up. It ended up in a fight, and Webb was pushed overboard."

"Then we pulled him out of the river," Penny supplied. "But he refused to tell us a thing."

"He knew better than to spill the story because he would have implicated himself. And the gang aboard this boat had no fear either, because they figured he was only pulling a bluff."

"But who was behind the plot?" Penny asked, puz-

zled. "What did the men hope to gain by dynamiting the plant?"

"They did it on orders from a man higher up—a man who personally hates the owner of the Conway Steel Plant."

"Then it was a grudge matter?" Captain Bricker inquired dubiously.

"Not entirely," Ben returned. "Labor troubles are mixed up in it. This man, who represents a minor faction, has been trying to gain control over the employes without much success. By planning a series of accidents similar to the dynamiting, he thought he might bring the management around to his way of thinking."

"Who is the leader?" Penny demanded impatiently.

Ben hesitated. "I hate to say," he confessed, "because I'm not absolutely certain. In the conversation I overheard before I was caught, he wasn't mentioned by name. But by putting two and two together, I have a fairly good idea."

"Guessing won't do in this business," said Captain Bricker.

"I know that," admitted Ben. "But here is one bit of fact I gained. The big boss was at the factory on the night of the explosion. In fact, he was nearly caught, and a photographer snapped a picture of him as he fled."

"You're sure of that?" Penny demanded excitedly.

"Yes, I heard the men talking about it. The boss has been worried for fear that picture will show up and convict him."

"Now I'm beginning to understand," Penny murmured. "It explains why the *Star* photography room was broken into several times. Someone was after those plates which weren't there!"

"What became of the pictures?" Captain Bricker asked. "They'll prove valuable evidence."

"Why, Salt Sommers has the camera and plates in the press car. Of course, we don't know what the plates will show until they're developed."

"We must have them at once," the captain said. He turned again to Ben. "Now did you know any of the men who attacked you?"

"Not a one. But I can give you a fairly good description of most of them. They're waterfront riffraff."

"In that case some of them may have their pictures in our files," the captain said. "I'll issue orders to round up all loiterers in this neighborhood. You should be able to identify most of them in a police line-up."

"I'm sure I can."

"Now about the higher-up who engineered the scheme. You said you had an idea who he is."

"That's right," agreed Ben. "The men spoke of him as a publisher. I don't like to accuse him out-

right, because I'll be suspected of trying to get even with a man I hate."

Light came swiftly to Penny. Into her mind leaped many facts hitherto puzzling, but which now seemed suddenly clear. The open skylight—the building adjoining the *Star*—Webb Nelson's call upon the editor of the *Mirror*.

"Ben, you don't need to accuse anyone!" she cried. "I'll do it myself. The man is Jason Cordell, and I think we can prove it too!"

CHAPTER

25

PICTURE PROOF

"YES, JASON CORDELL is the man responsible," Ben agreed soberly. "I can't prove it, but in my own mind I'm sure."

"You used to work for him, didn't you?" the police captain inquired, the inflection of his voice implying that he thought the former reporter might be prejudiced.

"I was fired," Ben admitted readily. "Cordell let me go and blacklisted me everywhere to prevent me from exposing him. He wanted to discredit me, so that anything I might say would carry no weight."

"Why were you really discharged, Ben?" Penny asked. "What did you learn about Mr. Cordell?"

"That he had pulled off no end of crooked deals and that he was mixed up with this outlaw labor group. Over a period of three or four years, Cordell has made a mint of money, and not from his paper either!"

"We'll question Cordell tonight," Captain Bricker promised. "The trick now is to get you to the station for first aid treatment. Then we'll want you to look through the police morgue and identify the pictures of as many of the *Snark's* crew as you can."

The officer turned to Penny. "As for those undeveloped plates, can you get them right away?"

"I think so," Penny returned. While Captain Bricker helped Ben up the companionway, she ran ahead to find her father and Salt and tell them of the latest developments.

The two were waiting in the press car. But when Mr. Parker learned how significant the pictures of the Conway Plant explosion might prove to be, he surprised Penny by declining to turn them over immediately to the police.

"We may want those plates for the *Star*," he declared. "If the police once get their hands on them, it might be a job to get them back again in time to be of any use to us."

"But Jason Cordell's arrest may depend upon them," Penny protested.

"We'll have the plates developed, and let police see them," Mr. Parker decided. "But the plates must remain in our hands. Come on, let's go!"

At a nod from the publisher, Salt started the press car, and without being instructed, headed for the *Star* building.

"How long will it take you to develop those plates?" Mr. Parker asked the photographer.

"Ten minutes."

"Good!" approved the publisher. "If they reveal anything, we'll telephone the police station at once."

As the car coasted to a standstill alongside the *Star* building, Penny's gaze roved to the darkened offices next door. All of the floors save one were without light. But in the suite occupied by the *Mirror*, a man plainly could be seen moving to and fro.

"There is Jason Cordell now!" she drew attention to him. "Why do you suppose he's at his office so late tonight?"

"There's no crime in that," replied Mr. Parker. "He may be guilty as Ben says, but I'll not believe it until I have the proof."

Letting themselves into the newspaper building, the three went up the back stairs to the photography studio. Salt immediately set about developing the plates.

"Something is coming up all right!" he declared jubilantly, as he rocked the developer tray back and forth.

In a few minutes, Salt had washed the plates and was able to examine them beneath the red light. One was blurred and revealed little. But the other plainly showed a man fleeing toward a waiting car.

"Why, the man is Webb Nelson!" Penny exclaimed, recognizing him.

"But notice the driver of the car," Salt said. "It's Jason Cordell! Ben was right."

"Then the man is guilty!" Penny cried. "Oh, Dad, I was certain of it!"

Mr. Parker scanned the plate carefully to ascertain there was no possible mistake.

"Yes, it's Jason Cordell," he agreed. "The truth is hard to believe. Why, I lunched with him only yesterday—"

"Dad, he's a criminal no matter how respectable he has acted."

"You're right," acknowledged Mr. Parker. "I'll notify the police at once and have him picked up for questioning."

Transmitting the important information to police headquarters, Mr. Parker talked with Captain Bricker who promised to take personal charge of the matter. As the publisher hung up the receiver, he was startled to have Penny grasp his arm. Excitedly, she pointed out the window.

"Now what?" he asked, failing to understand.

"The light just went off in Mr. Cordell's office! He's leaving!"

"Then we'll stop him," her father decided. "Salt, you stay here and rush that plate through! I'll detain

Cordell by one means or another until the police arrive!"

With Penny close beside him, he ran down the back stairs to the street. Breathlessly they arrived at the next building. The elevator was not running, but they could hear someone coming down the stairway. Then Jason Cordell, a brief case tucked under his arm, came into view. He stopped short upon seeing Mr. Parker and his daughter.

"Working late?" Mr. Parker inquired pleasantly.

"That's right," agreed the other. He would have walked on, but the publisher barred the exit.

"By the way, I met a friend of yours tonight," Mr. Parker said, stalling for time.

"That so? Who was he?"

"Webb Nelson."

Mr. Cordell's face did not change expression, but his eyes narrowed guardedly.

"Not a friend of mine," he corrected carelessly.

"But I've seen him in your office," Penny said.

Mr. Cordell looked her straight in the eyes and smiled as if in amusement. "That may be," he admitted, "but all who come to my office are not my friends."

He tried to pass again, but Mr. Parker stood his ground. "Say, what is this?" Mr. Cordell demanded, suddenly suspicious.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you a few questions about

your friend Webb Nelson. Suppose we go back to your office."

"Suppose we don't," Cordell retorted. "I'm tired and I'm going home. If you want to see me, come around tomorrow during business hours."

"Which may be too late."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the *Mirror* editor blustered. "Furthermore, I'm not interested. Get out of my way."

Instead, Mr. Parker grasped him firmly by the arm. Cordell tried to jerk free, and in so doing, dropped his brief case, which Penny promptly seized.

"Give that to me!" the man shouted furiously.

Penny smiled, for through the plate glass window she had observed the approach of a police car. Another moment and uniformed men were swarming about Mr. Cordell.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man demanded angrily. "I'll report you all to the Safety Director who is my friend!"

"You'll report to him all right," agreed Captain Bricker. "Now come along quietly. If you can answer a few questions satisfactorily, you'll be allowed to return home."

"What do you want to know?" Cordell asked sullenly.

"Where were you on the night of the 16th?"

"Now how should I know?" the man retorted sar-

castically. "I can't remember that far back. But probably I was home in bed."

"You're wanted in connection with the Conway dynamiting," the officer informed him.

Mr. Cordell snorted with anger. "Of all the ridiculous charges! I know nothing about the affair."

Out of the door burst Salt Sommers. He was without a hat, but he carried a picture, still wet, in the palm of his hand.

"So you know nothing about the dynamiting," he mimicked. "Well, gentlemen, take a look at this!"

Mr. Cordell and the policemen gathered about him, studying the photograph. Plainly it showed Webb Nelson fleeing toward a car driven by the *Mirror* editor.

"What does this prove?" the man blustered. "I admit the car is mine. I was driving past the plant at the time of the explosion. This fellow, Nelson, leaped into my auto and ordered me to drive on."

"A moment ago you claimed you weren't even near the Conway Plant," Penny tripped him. "You knew Webb Nelson very well. Furthermore, you entered the *Star* offices several times trying to get your hands on this picture!"

"Ridiculous!"

"At least once when you found the stairway door locked, you went in through the skylight," Penny accused.

"Of all the crazy ideas!" The editor laughed jeeringly. "Imagine me crawling through a skylight!"

"I notice your coat has a torn place," Penny said, taking a scrap of blue wool from her purse. "This, I believe, is a perfect match."

Mr. Cordell gazed at the wool and shrugged. "All right," he admitted coolly. "I did crawl through the skylight twice to see if I could find the picture. I knew this fool photographer had snapped a picture of me, and I feared I might be falsely accused."

"Then you knew Nelson was mixed up in the dynamiting?" Captain Bricker questioned.

"I wasn't certain," Mr. Cordell said in confusion. "The reason I didn't report to the police was that I was afraid of being involved. After that night, Webb Nelson tried to blackmail me. Because of my position, I dared have no publicity."

The *Mirror* editor's explanation carried a certain amount of conviction, and Penny was dismayed to hear Captain Bricker assure him that if a mistake had been made he would be granted freedom immediately after he had talked to the police chief.

"I shall accompany you without protest," the *Mirror* editor returned stiffly. "Later I shall file charges against those who have tried to damage my character."

Captain Bricker asked Salt for the picture which he intended to take to police headquarters.

"May I see it a moment?" Penny requested.

He gave the picture to her. She studied it and her face brightened. "Captain Bricker, look at this!" she exclaimed, pointing to an object in the car which barely was noticeable.

Everyone gathered about Penny, peering at the photograph. On the rear seat of the car driven by Mr. Cordell was a box which plainly bore the printing: "Salvage Company—Explosives."

"Ed McClusky who works for the Salvage Company, told me that dynamite had been stolen from his firm," Penny declared. "And here it is in Mr. Cordell's automobile! Apparently, he wasn't just driving by the plant at the time of the explosion! This picture proves why he was there!"

"Right you are, young lady," chuckled Captain Bricker. "You've pinned the goods on him for fair." Prodding the *Mirror* editor with his stick, he ordered curtly: "Get along, you! This puts a different face on it. You'll be spending the rest of the night in the Safety building."

After Mr. Cordell, still protesting his innocence, had been taken away, Penny, her father, and Salt returned to the deserted newspaper building.

"Will Cordell manage to get free?" she asked anxiously.

"Not a chance of it," Mr. Parker answered. "That picture tags him right. With Ed McClusky and Ben

to testify against him, he's the same as convicted now."

"Speaking of Ben, what's to be done about him, Dad?"

"We'll give him a job here. He's had unfair treatment, but we'll make it up to him. However, we'll have to let one employee go."

"Not me?" Penny asked anxiously.

"No," her father laughed. "It's your friend, Elda Hunt. Her attitude isn't right. We've tried to give her a chance, but over and over she has demonstrated that she isn't cut out to be a newspaper woman."

"She'll probably blame me for her discharge," Penny sighed. "Not that it matters. I ceased worrying about Elda a long while ago."

"She'll have no difficulty getting work elsewhere, and I hope she'll be better adjusted."

"How about the story of Mr. Cordell's arrest? And the picture?" Penny inquired. "Will the *Star* print them tomorrow?"

"On the front page of our first edition," Mr. Parker chuckled. "Salt didn't turn over the plate to the police, so we're all set. By morning, the story should be bigger and better than ever. By then, the guilt will be well pinned on Cordell, and some of the *Snark* gang may have been rounded up."

Curious to learn the very latest details, Salt called the police station. He was told that Ben Bartell had

identified several of the *Snark's* crew from police pictures, and it was expected all would be arrested within twenty-four hours.

"Not a bad night's work;" Mr. Parker chuckled, as he snapped off the photography room lights. "Everything locked?"

"How about the skylight?" asked Penny.

"Open again," reported Salt as he checked it. "It's just no use trying to get folks to cooperate around here. Too many fresh air fiends."

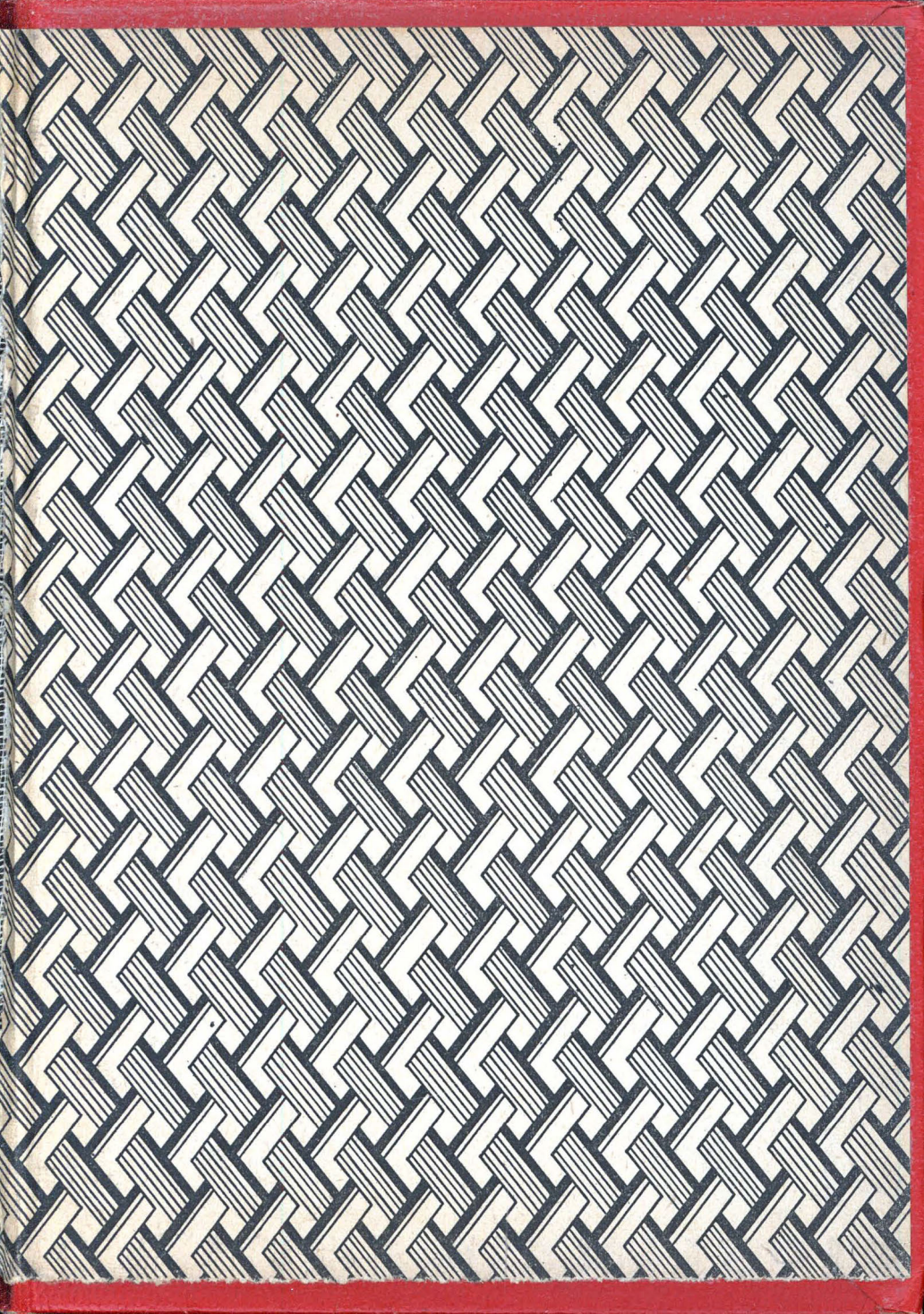
"Let it stay unlocked," Mr. Parker directed carelessly. "With our prowler safely behind bars, we've no further cause for worry." He looked at his watch. "Now, even though it is late, suppose we go and celebrate?"

"Oh, fine!" cried Penny. "And why not stop at the Safety building and ask Ben Bartell to go with us? I want to tell him about his new job."

"So do I," agreed her father heartily. "Where shall we go?"

Penny linked arms with Salt and her father, skipping as she piloted them down the dark hall.

"Just a quiet place where they serve big juicy steaks," she decided. "If I know Ben, that's what he would like best of all."



SIGNAL in the DARK

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